THE TREE OF LIFE

A Screenplay
by
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First Draft
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PREFACE

The "I" who speaks in this story is not the author. Rather, he hopes that you might see yourself in this "I" and understand this story as your own.

PART ONE

EXT. O'BRIEN HOUSE

An ordinary house in central Texas. A neighborhood at the edge of town.

Three children -- brothers -- are playing in the back yard. The eldest, 11, is JACK. RL is two years younger, and STEVE is 6. Their MOTHER and FATHER, Mr. and Mrs. O'Brien, look on.

In the center of the yard stands a tall oak tree. The year is 1956.

OTHER ANGLES

The boys play with their dog, SHEP. Their mother smiles, content. Life has covered her with blessing. There is nothing she sees but it means her good.

Her heart, it seems, is especially drawn to her middle son; the sweetest, most genial of the boys.

The sun is setting in the west. A doorbell rings.

EXT. O'BRIEN HOUSE - TWELVE YEARS LATER

Twelve years later, a Western Union man walks away from the house. Mrs. O'Brien leans against a wall as she reads a telegram.

INT. O'BRIEN HOUSE

Mr. O'Brien watches as his wife stares out the window.

FATHER
Can I do anything?

She shakes her head. She lets him kiss her, but generally seems unaware of him. She notices nothing; says nothing.

He must be strong. There will be time enough for tears. He grieves for her more than for himself -- that she should be stricken in this way, a woman so faithful, kind and upright -- who through the whole of her life has denied herself -- who has loved the good -- given to the poor, comforted the desolate. A flashforward: Men rise up and bow when she passes by.

INT. O'BRIEN HOUSE

Friends have come to visit.

BETTY
You did everything in the world to make him happy. No one could have had a better life.

JAN
He was such a fine boy.

RUTH
-- Such a fine musician! The sweetest child I ever saw.

BETTY
He only goes a little before the rest of us.

RUTH
It's all so bitter now, but -- you'll have lovely memories of him. Those can't be taken away.

The memories are a torment to her, not a consolation.

JAN
He'll always live in your heart.

Live? That is what he will not do.

BETTY
We never really part. Not from those we love.

JAN
The pain will pass away.

She does not want it to. No, she wants to keep it, always. A shard of glass in her heart.

RUTH
He's at peace.

Let them live in their naive illusion. If only she still could! To hear his name spoken is more than she can bear. Does no one understand?

Now, when others look at her, they glance quickly away. She is aware of being an uncomfortable presence to everyone she meets, particularly when she speaks.

BETTY
...He's in God's hands now.

Where is God? Where was he then? Nature gives no answer, whispers not a word. The child was in God's hands the whole time, was he not?

JAN
...He didn't suffer. He's better off where he is... It's so hard -- you can do everything right, and still --

Their voices seem far away, as though they were speaking to her through a tunnel. Let them talk to each other. Not to her.

A vast, barren plain. Death reveals the emptiness that was there before.

Nothing is but it. The fact is like a wall. She can see nothing else. Nothing beyond.

Shattered, so many lives; cast blindly here and there, like water from rock to rock.

INT. O'BRIEN HOUSE

She cannot look in his room. When she does, he dies to her a second time. She paces before the closed door.

INT. O'BRIEN HOUSE

Her would-be comforters go away dismayed and apprehensive: Why she, and not they? They are themselves bewildered, some reduced to tears.

JAN
The best woman in the whole town!

RUTH
There may be things that we don't know.

BETTY (O.S.)
She still has two left.

She overhears their voices after they are gone. How much more easily they speak as soon as they are out of her presence!

Not just her child -- it seems that all creation has died. Nature has betrayed the heart that loved it.

A child appears with a casserole.

BOY
Mom sent this.

He quickly retreats, his eyes fixed on the ground.

In the next room, Mr. O'Brien laughs and shakes his head. He does not seem quite to have taken it all in.

FATHER
That rascal! I remember how you couldn't get him into the tub. Then, once he was in, you couldn't get him back out!

The grey dawn of the next day. The O'Brien house seems no different from any other on the block. The postman goes about his business. The paperboy.

The men of the neighborhood speak among themselves in hushed voices as they set their sprinklers out at dusk. The fall of the O'Brien house strikes awe in them. A family once happy and prosperous, brought down in sorrow and doom.

TIGHT ON MRS. O'BRIEN

Through a crack in the bedroom door she sees her husband on his knees. What good has it brought him? Would he pray to a spider?

Gardenias, a climbing rose. Nature puts forth life at will. Why should a dog have breath, her child none?

Later, when someone reaches for the child's guitar, she hears her husband insist that it not be moved. Not an inch.

MR. O'BRIEN

Her husband, too, attempts to console her. But having an equal cause for sorrow, he is no more convincing than her friends have been.

Grief so deep has made her unfamiliar to him; almost holy. Still he must say something.

FATHER
We have -- to be strong -- for them -- for the other boys. We can't let them see --
(she looks away)
I haven't been the husband you deserve -- I haven't loved you enough -- still -- let me into your heart. Let us share the grief.

FATHER (CONT'D)
It's too hard alone. I thought we would go first -- never have to know -- to see --
(she looks up)
I wish it could have been me. I took the confidence out of him. I never got a chance to tell him -- how sorry I was! I made him unhappy -- anxious -- I did it out of love! Forgive me!

She hesitates, waits until she can swallow back a sob to speak -- then can find nothing to say. What did they do to bring such a calamity on themselves? What did the world gain? It neither knew nor cared.

FATHER (CONT'D)
I'm going to be strong for him. That's what he'd want, and that's what he's going to get.

An empty swing. A slide. A bridge. Grass fading in the August heat.

He takes her into his arms. How small their differences seem now! He loves her wholly. They are one at last, in grief.

MOTHER (O.S.)
Do we say we have three boys, or two?
(in a whisper)
I hate my life -- I want to die -- to with him -- my child!

She will not be consoled. He looks at her, helpless.

MOTHER (CONT'D)
(suddenly)
Whatever I say, don't believe it.

Alone, she prays. She hears no answering voice.

Mr. O'Brien closes the lid of his piano.

Her soul is gone. Her good. She goes about her life; she walks, eats, sleeps, wakes up. But she does not live. Each place, each hour is the same.

The best of her lay in his soul. She lived through him, saw through his eyes. Apart from him she cannot see the work of God, or nature's order. In her is death; in him was life.

A bare tree in winter. Nature lied.

JACK (ADULT) - SERIES OF ANGLES

Gradually we become aware of Jack, their eldest son, grown up now. The others have tried and failed to console his mother. How shall he?

JACK (O.S.)
It broke your heart. Never afterwards were you the same -- your faith in goodness shaken -- though carefully you kept it secret, lest our faith be shaken, too.
(she walks alone)
In vain! We knew!

Gone. He has left the world a sham. A friend whispers in Mrs. O'Brien's ear:

MRS. STONE
Don't let them console you. Don't forget! For a long time you'll have the pain. But it will turn to joy -- in the end.

We are aboard a train, plunging through the countryside; the locomotive far ahead, barely visible. A blind, overwhelming force.

JACK (O.S.)
Why do you grieve and waste away?
You se love flowed out
un ly!

The rails weave in and out beneath the wheels. The steel lines of fate. It runs along its way, defies all other paths, all walls, crashes through every obstacle.

She cannot be persuaded to turn or look. She sits with her face averted, staring at the ground.

Each day she finds it harder to bear. She cannot read, or sleep. The dawn light coming in through the window is ghastly to her. It is as though he had died again. And yet she would not be surprised if he were to walk into the room.

Children play. Spring comes. The crocus raise their heads. The redbuds blaze. They return.

A door through which one fears to look. A path one shrinks from taking. Empty parks. A vast, neglected garden. A gate. The past consuming all.

Decaying statues in a long, straight lane of trees. The figures of forgotten gods. They gaze at the horizon as though in search of their deliverer. Balustrades; a drained pool. Walks strewn with sodden leaves. Stairs that lead nowhere. A butterfly.

She remembers when the sun shone about her, when it seemed that she would die in her nest.

Crows hovering over a stubble field, foraging in the furrows.

JACK (O.S.) (CONT'D)
Who are you that took him? You smash what is most dear -- send flies to wounds you might have healed. Who can hinder you?

Friends come by less. She does not mind. Her child is more present to her in death than, really, they in life.

Good night, my child. She shall not see him. Till heaven and earth have passed away.

Sent for nothing. The faces of those who live on; strangers, preferred to him.

High overhead, migrating geese call to each other; separated, lost in the clouds.

A buoy, clanging in the fog.

Nature has returned to chaos.

A hand on a curtain. What is death? What will it be like? The pictures stop. The movie ends.

Jack stops on the street, listens. It is as though the wind were trying to tell him something.

He finds himself on a staircase, its upper and lower reaches lost in the darkness.

JACK (O.S.) (CONT'D)
You whom we met in the woods and on the hills, whom first in her eyes we knew -- how shall I name you?

CUs to show his mother's air of embarrassed shyness; her good humor and truthfulness; her affectionate, sorrowing face, always looking into him, wishing him strength and happiness.

Her hands when she is very old: those worn hands that once held so much that was dear to them, that once he could take and hold as tightly and for as long as he wished. Soon he must lose her, too, with all he loves.

Change; the spring of all sorrow. Is anything exempt from birth, growth and decay? Nothing everlasting?

A shadow dancing on the ground. This world is passing away.

His father, who at first was careful to remain calm and composed, rips off his coat and tears at his hair in grief.

JACK (O.S.) (CONT'D)
Teach me the way to you.

The oak tree in the front yard. Its roots reach down into the darkness of the earth, towards its center and source. The branches spread towards the light, towards discovery and utterance; a fountain of life.

JACK (O.S.) (CONT'D)
Brother, dear brother -- We had one heart within us. One soul -- where you left off and I began, I could not tell.

The immovable trunk, a universe of leaves spreading above it, whispering; an oracle.

JACK (O.S.) (CONT'D)
Wher are you? How shall I find you again? I will go in search of you -- through all the worlds.

The camera rises through the branches, seeks a way towards the sky above.

JACK (O.S.) (CONT'D)
Brother, speak through me! Guide me! Answer me from where you are! See what I was, what I am now! Lend your spirit to this song!

He discovers himself on the verge of falling asleep at the wheel of a car. He fights to stay awake. The car is drifting off the road, and still he cannot rouse himself to consciousness, to the required act of will.

A hand touches his shoulder, waking him --

EXT. CITY OF DESTRUCTION - THE ARTIFICIAL WORLD - LATE DAY TO NIGHT TO DAWN - JACK (ADULT)

Jack wakes to find himself in that landscape of paralysis and despair which today goes by the name of a city. The familiar world has assumed a threatening aspect.

A number of scenes with the adult Jack follow encounters with friends and strangers. To avoid interrupting the flow of the narrative, we will not specify them here. From time to time we hear Jack's thoughts. He leads us through the story.

The cutting is quick and staccato, to suggest the fractured quality of modern life.

His eyes are bright with longing. He never lingers anywhere for long but is forever off, forever moving on. Where did he go wrong, or wander from the path?

The stars are washed out. The sky is a haze. The moon shines down like any other senseless light, high above the towers of steel and glass. Where in these streets can he find any evidence of the world's order, any sign to help him on his way?

The others do not meet his eyes. Each makes his way alone, shut up within himself. None can be sure of the other. No tie is fixed or lasting.

Like a bird trapped inside a room, beating against the windows and ceiling, the soul struggles for a time, then sinks down in defe

The buildings hem him round like the trees of a wild forest. A false nature; a universe of death. A sightless world, roofed over, shut off from things above. Here one must stoop to walk. A world that would exclude the transcendent, that says: I am, and there is nothing else. A world without love.

It seems he could escape if only he could bring himself to will it. Somehow he cannot. He has gone to sleep, he cannot wake up. He wakes from one dream to another.

The sights of a modern city: it could be Chicago, New York, Houston, Paris, Mumbai, Los Angeles, or a composite of them all. We never see it whole -- no skyline or defining monument -- fragments only -- a frenzy of things and people on the move -- a continuous flow of trains and cars -- a new Babel.

Change seems the only constant in this city; disappearance, loss. Being is a shadow. There is nothing but this endless flux. Nothing eternal, nothing sure.

In the faces of strangers that anguished look of our times which betrays itself beneath the smiles and courtesy -- which, increasingly, even children wear.

Each a shadow to the other, each with his own eyes fixed on the ground in front of him, absorbed in his private world. Spectators in a movie theater.

JACK
Sweet brother -- you who filled our hearts with light -- who drew us close, who made us one -- a family, a home -- gone. Into the night which has no dawn.

He stops, listens. The grey light of a television flickers on the ceiling of a lonely apartment. Somewhere a couple rage and howl at each other.

Time lapse shots of tall buildings, with clouds passing above them. Hallways. Offices at night. Walls.

JACK (CONT'D)
What was it that you pointed to -- knew better than I? You overlooked insult and injury. Were gentle, kind --

Nothing adds up, or leads to anything else. He lives in succession.

The shadows of passersby on the street. A dry streambed. A garden in winter. The stiff, dead stalks of sunflowers; their heads bowed in defeat.

JACK (O.S.) (CONT'D)
Speak! Let me hear -- see! Let it not have been in vain! Sing with me -- through me -- you, the true artist -- lend me your strength!

Everything conspires to lead one to go on as before. To rest in the tomb. To sleep.

The concrete banks of the L.A. river. Nature is dying. Without nature, will the spirit die? The eye flits here and there, like a frightened bird.

The others guess nothing of his condition, and he speaks not a word. What would he say?

Fog from the beach. Faces, indistinct.

MOTHER (O.S.)
I knew such things happened, but -- it seemed they wouldn't touch me. I could have been with him --

Her voice fades out, and she is gone. In a moment of fantasy, he finds himself swept along in a river. The waters rise, threatening to engulf him.

Now he finds himself inside a burning house. Smoke slides in under the door. Flames peel the paint from the ceiling. He stuffs his fist in his mouth to keep from screaming. The others neither speak nor act, as though they lay under some spell or enchantment.

A stranger with a Walkman. A driver in a traffic jam.

JACK (O.S.)
Losing you, I lost my way.

Physical life in a world abandoned by the spirit. Organized unreality. The soul a hindrance in one's dealings here. A burden. A mere quantity of thoughts and desires.

One is without form and void. Thousand-minded. At odds with himself. A miscellany, not a man.

Cold public works. The city; the lost creation; the cosmos become a cave.

Travelers on a New York subway.

All await a new creation. None knows how to bring it forth.

He finds himself on an airliner. It skims over the tops of the trees, rising and falling, struggling to stay aloft. It flies under power lines, narrowly avoids houses and apartment buildings. The other passengers have gone to sleep, or pay no attention.

The roar of the senses; loud, ever louder. Sensation becomes substance. The false world so surrounds us that it taken the place of nature.

This is a new death; death of the spirit, extinction of the soul.

The supreme misery: to be cheated of the sight of essence: to find oneself abandoned to the busy dance of things which pass away.

What is despair but to lose the eternal?

Forms dissolve like thoughts, like shapes in a waterfall. Newspaper headlines. Fragments of TV shows. Swarming facts.

Walls, security lights, traffic. A dark, empty cathedral.

Where are you to find the spring and source of life? Will you die before you do?

VOICE (O.S.)
Lead me from the unreal to the real.
Lead me from darkness to light.
Lead me from death to eternal life.

To what end is nature? Is there nothing but this chaos, this congeries of scraps and fragments? Nothing which binds them together?

A new hell; entirely of our times; a glass box. The sky is covered over. Man has shut himself in.

He must find a way out. He must journey through time, from the outward and external to the heart of creation.

A solitary tree in the middle of a parking lot. A clock. A closed door. A porch light. A lame man limping down the street. The images follow on each other in quick succession. The sound snaps in and out.

He finds himself on a high building. He leaps off the edge, into thin air, without giving a thought to how he might survive the fall. He wakes up with a gasp.

A figure stands near him. He cannot see its face, but he feels a strange peace flow into him; a sense of radiant love. Who are you? Jack seems to ask. Why can I not come to you?

The figure points towards a gate. Beyond it lies a field. Trembling, Jack looks back towards the city.

Come out! the figure seems to say. There is that near you which will guide you, if only you trust its lead.

The figure reaches out, touches the crown of Jack's head, then is gone.

Jack looks around. Where to begin?

Night lifts off like a fog. The street lamps flicker out. The morning star burns in a gap between the tall buildings -- solitary, unheeded -- a promise of that world which here is but a legend.

You -- who are you? The star seems to address him.

Beneath the artificial world, the true face of creation, covered over, obscured, beckoning us still.

He closes his eyes. He would rather sleep than undertake the necessary struggle. He awaits a command that has already been given.

Let us sing a new song, tell a new story; one which, mindful of the ancient tales, takes its inspiration from science,

Let us search for the permanent amid the fleeting and mutable, for that which endures through the spectacle of ceaseless change. Let us discover the eternal, the good.

Jack walks along the Santa Monica shore. Surfers bob up and down in the line-up. Children play in the tide. Their laughter, their wild cries, take him back to the past, to his childhood and beyond it, to the world's own -- to the first light of creation.

At the edge of the city, he sees a tree. He reaches out to touch it. The instant he does, the universe springs up from its source.

THE CREATION

We show the growth of the cosmos, the great epic of evolution, from the Big Bang through the long ages of geological time, down to the present day.

We begin in the chaos or nothingness out of which space and time arose -- in a realm beyond our power to imagine, without form or coherence, void of here and now. Suddenly, like joy replacing sadness and brooding, light breaks forth, and the universe is born.

Molecular clouds gather to make galaxies, which sail out through the void like ships on a sea without shores. New stars, new worlds are born and pass away, like wasted seed. They are the furnaces in which the elements of our future life are smelted. Many experiments must be tried and rejected before our system is hit upon; much labor expended, with continual improvements through the long ages.

At last the ancestral earth appears; a bulb of gases, more like a star than a planet, seared by the sun's fire, glowing like a coal from deep within.

The gases cool to liquid. A solid core falls out; a thin crust forms. From time to time the vapors clear away to reveal a mighty inferno of magma and pitch.

The sky fills with steam. Rains fall for millennia, cooling the surface by degrees. For ages there is no clear day of sun, no night of stars; only thunder and lightning. But by and by the mists drift off, the clouds part and the first land appears, a low island of meteoritic rubble and stark volcanic stone.

With no plants to hold the land in place, wind and water carve the stone into fantastic shapes. Shadows move mathematically over the hills. The vast wastes wait for nothing. Each day is like the last.

In the boiling waters of a hot spring, entities develop that can maintain their integrity in the face of disturbance from without. They do not endure by maintaining their rigidity. They are soft and yielding. They resist change by themselves changing endlessly, like a whirlpool, inventing variations on themselves which protect them from injury and accident and gradually create a world more favorable to their growth.

We cannot tell precisely when or how life begins. It comes not as a unique event, at a precise stroke of the clock. The first living things are simple thermophiles; odd, marginal forms, neither plant nor animal, barely over the indefinable line which separates the animate from the inanimate.

They drift in solitude through the vast, lifeless sea, beneath the incandescent skies of a planet still racked by volcanic eruptions and menaced by the impact of comets and asteroids.

In areas protected from the wind, colonies of bacteria appear as scums and muds, tinting the shores along the water-courses, like bathtub rings. They have no predators; death is something yet unknown.

Microbial mats appear at the edges of the tides. They in turn give rise to stromatolites; hard, chalky knobs of rock, shaped like cabbages or cauliflowers, the architecture of generations of cyanobacteria living on top of each other, like coral in a reef.

Bacteria that once preyed on each other learn gradually to live in community. As such communities become hereditary, the first cells with a nucleus arise. Together the bacteria arrive at a result which none by itself could have achieved.

From the beginning, cooperation plays as great a part as competition in the ascent of life. It succeeds where naked power and selfishness do not, making the deadliest enemies indispensable to each other's survival. The struggle for existence is not life's sole or fundamental law.

Slowly the bacteria creep inland, spreading over the volcanic debris like a layer of felt. Plants, magic jewel boxes of chlorophyll, soon abound. Instead of drawing nourishment from their surroundings, they produce it for themselves, transforming sunlight and carbon into living tissue.

Photosynthesis has made life self-sufficient, just at the moment it was living on borrowed time, in danger of eating up every particle of nourishment in the sea. Now life can manufacture its own food -- no longer depend on getting it, already made, from a source outside itself.

Some of the plants, lacking chlorophyll, find it easier to prey on others than to manufacture their own nourishment from lean water and sunlight. Thus the first animals arise; life robbing life; assassins.

Alien as they appear, they show the beginnings of need, of purpose and will; the unmistakable marks of identity, the first true signs of self. Something new has taken root in nature; something which is not driven by external forces but set in motion from within, prompted by itself and nothing else.

Colonies of animals arise in which the functions of life are cleverly divided. Multicellular creatures spread through the seas using every foothold they can find to establish an existence, no matter how narrow or constraining it might at first appear.

We see the creation, not as an event in the distant past, the result of a finished and forgotten act, but rather as something which happens in every moment of time: no less a miracle now, this present hour, than it was in the beginning.

The film is like a sieve, sifting the seed from the husk of appearances, the changeless from the changing.

Volvox, sponges, sea fans, anemones, corals and jellyfish: the creatures fill the newly hospitable waters in inexhaustible numbers. There are no fish as yet; no crabs or shrimp or lobster. And yet it is an age of unparalleled opportunity; for the first time, now and never again, a world free of competition. The wildest fancies are permitted; anything can find a place. Bizarre beings spring up from the sea's imagination, then vanish forever: Hallucingenia, Opabinia, Anomalocaris.

Segmented worms appear, and after them the first vertebrates; simple fish. Spines and jaws allow the vertebrates to leave the sea floor, to give up grubbing in the mud for nourishment in order to prey on larger creatures.

Predators shape their prey, driving them to develop stronger armor, greater dexterity and speed. Wondrous fact, that had life not been compelled to face the threat of a violent death, it might never have risen above the ooze.

Death comes as a late arrival to the creation, to give life a greater capability and scope -- paradoxically, to make it stronger and more lasting.

The light flashes at the water's surface above, beckoning us higher. Algae spread up from the sea. Mosses and liverworts appear. Here, on land, the plants need not contend for light. They seem to rejoice in their new independence, to reach out with the vigor of beings unexpectedly set free. By and by, the hills are carpeted with a mat of diminutive green vegetation.

Frost and lichens break down the rocks into a soil fit for the more developed plants still waiting by the shore.

Horseshoe crabs come up onto the shore to lay their eggs. Sea water, rich as beer, froths and foams around them. Where before there was no sound of life, now we hear the faint, familiar choir of insects. Millipedes forage on the mud flats. Scorpions and ghost crabs come out of the surf to prey on them. Silverfish follow, and soon winged relatives are in evidence. With the power of flight, the insects can range far and wide in search of food, scatter their seed and escape their enemies, though as yet no enemy has appeared.

Is nature mere weather, doing and undoing without end? What does it work toward? What purpose does it have in view?

Nothing stands still or keeps its place. All is growth and ceaseless unfolding. One force works in all, advancing swiftly from form to form, never lingering in any single one, forever rushing on; within all things, but not enclosed; outside all, but not excluded.

From time to time, lest we forget that we are sharing our hero's perspective, we cut back to Jack in the city, going through the motions of his everyday life.

The first fishes with amphibian traits gain the shore. Swamp and marshland have replaced the wide, windy plains of the preceding ages. The forms of vegetation are simple, few. There are no reeds or grasses. No flower breaks the gloom. The earth is a vast, wet Eden. Except near the poles, there are no seasons. Each year is like the last.

Reptiles emerge from the amphibians, and dinosaurs in turn from the reptiles. Among the dinosaurs we discover the first signs of maternal love, as the creatures learn to care for each other.

Is not love, too, a work of the creation? What should we have been without it? How had things been then?

Silent as a shadow, consciousness has slipped into the world.

The plant kingdom, too, advances as the first seed plants emerge: cycads, araucarias, conifers and gingkos. Exalting music alternates with long stretches of peaceful sound; wind and waves and summer crickets.

Nature seems everywhere to be leading toward something. Why this delay in arriving at its ends? Why does it feel its way along -- wander, dawdle, delay? Why twist and turn and backtrack, as though it were finding its way through a maze? Why establish hindrances and obstacles only to put itself to the trouble of devising stratagems for overcoming them?

Mammals peer out from their hiding places in the trees, waiting for the cold of night to descend and reduce the reptiles to inactivity. None is larger than a squirrel, few larger than a mouse. They are a thin, precarious line -- inconspicuous in the general landscape, holding on against great odds, in constant danger of being extinguished altogether.

This is the fate that befalls the dinosaurs instead, as a large asteroid slams into the earth, covering it for years in a pall of dust. The plants die off; the larger reptiles starve. For long years the earth lies fallow. Gradually the mammals come forth to take up those niches which the dinosaurs have left vacant.

Nature seems to waste and blunder cruelly. And yet, except for this disaster, the dinosaurs might have dominated the earth down to the present day. How strange that calamity and disease should lead life forward -- prove indispensable to its unfolding -- that such grandeur should rise up from a foundation of pain and death and ruin!

The ichneumon wasp, the crocodile, the shark -- to think that they, too, were the fruit of long, painstaking labor and calculation -- brought forth with an equal care! To think that they now go patiently about their tasks, burning with a life as real as ours!

Grasses and modern birds now make their appearance; soon thereafter, the first primates. At last we come to man, the triumph of the earth, paragon of creatures and miracle of miracles. He walks with head aloft, his shoulders broad and strong, his gaze fixed on the heavens, the crown and glory of creation.

We suggest, in quick succession, the steps by which he moved from a life of nomadic savagery to a settled, stable culture.

He tames the reindeer and the wild sheep. He thatches his roof to keep out the shafts of rain. He draws furrows through the earth and guides the water to his fields.

What a short time our race has occupied this globe, what a late arrival we are after all -- a beginning -- creatures more of the future than of the past! An unspeakably great future it might be, and yet, though nature should be sufficient to our wants, we have set ourselves against it, and against each other.

Everything sings in the great chorus; each knows its place and is happy. Man alone does not. Why? Even now we live in the first day. The splendor of nature's distant beginning shines within us. Yet somehow we have lost our way.

Tares stand among the grain: bright red poppies, thistles and thorns. The ravaged earth. The ruins of ancient cities. Great walls thrown down by war. Dry, abandoned wells. The stone head of some ancient god, buried to his neck in sand. A temple engulfed by the sea.

Why does the world lie broken and in heaps? Where did it all go wrong?

Our hero is left, if not quite where he was before, nevertheless in doubt and misgiving. He trusted nature to answer his questions. It answers some but raises others in turn.

We have lost the eternal -- within us and without. How did it first come to pass? How does it happen even now, today, in the life of each and all?

A ladder, leading up into a tree. A spring, running from a rock. A rose.

How shall we recover the eternal which increasingly we seek for, without knowing how we should?

PART TWO

EXT. SHORE, HOUSE, BRIDGE, GATE, SPARKS, ETC. - BOMARZO, COLLODI, BAGNAIA, ETC. - STARLINGS

Fast, wide-angle shots; the tempo quick and lively after the adagio of nature.

A shore. Beyond it a dark, unbounded plain. Figures in the mist. Souls, as yet unborn. Children, of all races, five or six years old. Before them stands a burning lamp.

They press towards it, each holding a candle which he lights at the source. One by one, cupping the flame, they go out of the darkness.

An ancient garden, enclosed by a wall. A peacock. Water flows from the mouth of a gargoyle in the center of the garden and runs down into a pool. They drink from it.

They pass through a gate. Cross a bridge.

EXT. TUNNEL, CAVE, BOOK, MEASURING STICK - ICELAND

The souls keep close together. Presently, one comes forward from among the rest: a boy. Helpers -- we cannot see their faces -- whisper in his ear. One motions him to come towards a door. He hesitates.

A woman in a bridal gown, her face covered by a veil, shows him her wedding ring; a field of sunflowers; gives him a tiny book which he must eat.

EXT. TREES, PORCH LIGHT, RIVER, POV COMING OUT OF CAVE

In quick cuts, the child looks back at the house from which he came. Already it seems far away.

He sees the porch light of his future home. Moths hover about the yellow lamp. Dust floats up from their wings.

A figure whispers in his ear. A hand motions him forward. Now he stands by a wide river. His POV, as though from a boat coming out of the darkness of a sea-cave, into the light.

EXT. O'BRIEN HOUSE

We return to the opening of the movie: to the tall oak tree in front of the O'Brien's house.

A thousand ages to lay down a bed of mud, a thousand more to shape a leaf or build a tree -- and all this labor to prepare a living soul!

The soul: the crown and apex of creation: the self, the center and inside of nature. Great not in space and time, but in capacity, in depth and power of apprehension. Where does it come from? When is it first born? How does it advance? Towards what?

How does it happen that I am I, and you are you?

The slow, dark birth of the soul -- greater, more mysterious than the birth of worlds.

INT. BEDROOM - NIGHT

A darkened house. The night throbs with crickets. A moonlit window. A curtain whispers over the sash. A visitor. A sound of thrashing cloth.

CULDOSCOPY - EMBRYO - WARM, LOVING MUSIC

The first signs of life: the punctum saliens, the heart's germ and precursor, beating in sharp throbs. Systole, diastole. Slowly the fetus grows, coheres. Feet, eyes, fingernails. Nature, so prodigal with wonders outside us, has placed the greatest within.

A boy. Fed by his mother's blood, he sleeps in the warm night of her body.

Tight on his ear, listening to the sounds of the world beyond. Somewhere there is laughter. Bells are ringing. Still he drowses.

INT. SUBMERGED ROOM - SPECIAL SET - LIT FLOOR LAMP, ETC.

The water's surface beckons. Loving voices whisper encouragement to him. What world lies up there -- unguessed, unseen? Slowly, he rises towards it. His hand feels here and there, pushes at a door, taps -- tap, tap --

The womb -- that sanctuary where all his wants were known and answered -- has become a prison, a tomb. He must break out, whatever the cost. He can delay no longer. Forward, out of the night to the land of days!

BIRTH - FIRST HUMAN SOUNDS - FIRST BREATH

His mother gasps, brave against the pain. There are beads of perspiration on her lips. At last the child bursts forth in a gush of blood. He draws his first breath. His cries are mixed with hers.

BABY'S POVS - MOTHER'S SMILE, HANDS, ETC.

His mother's smile: the first thing he perceives. It covers him with light. She is goodness, peace, the fountain of life: hers is the very breath of paradise. Wordlessly, she speaks with his soul. He cannot tell where she leaves off and he begins. From the beginning she ignores her interests and convenience to serve his.

But who is this -- his father? Their relation is not as clear. Mr. O'Brien looks at his wife as the child is passed into his arms. Tears of joy sting his eyes. What have we done? he seems to ask.

The child has awakened from out of nothing, risen from the uncomprehending dust. Why now? Not earlier, or a thousand years hence?

He looks with a heart of trust. No care assaults him that his mother cannot answer; no pain, no troubling need. Her touch puts fear to flight. A perfect love surrounds him. Father and mother speak as one. He lives in a world free of contradiction.

Colors, shapes, curious sounds: at first nothing coheres. Then, little by little, things assume a sense. Letter by letter, he spells them out. What new dream is this?

She looks at him in wonder. His ear, like a sea-shell fresh from the surf; his hands and arms and mouth, trembling from time to time as though in fear.

O that world that death knew not!

He grasps his mother's finger. Her hands cup his feet. The world is bound by her smile. The sun is a toy.

INT. O'BRIEN BEDROOM - INFANCY - MUSIC [2B]

She looks at him in his crib. He shouts with delight. Everything runs together; a blur, a dream. He holds his hand close to his face. The lights on the tree in the living room shine red, green and blue. His father plays the piano.

She leans down over him. All blessing, nourishment, beauty proceed from her. The promise of deep joy!

Outside, the oak tree throbs with cicadas. A sprinkler ticks back and forth.

FLOWERS, ANIMALS, BOYS - FORCED PERSPECTIVE SET

Everything is bigger and more animated later it will appear. Things speak with him directly. A dragonfly looks at him, then darts on. At night the curious moon peers in through his window. Mother, come! Where am I now?

JACK

Momma!

A ball rolls ahead of him. He cannot close his hands around it. He reaches in a bucket of minnows. The little fish sing as they run from his hand.

His mother watches as he takes his first steps. She feels a pinprick in her chest, a pinch: to see his first attempt at independence, freedom, detachment.

He chases the sky. He wraps himself in skirts of light. He laughs with delight as she catches him up into her arms.

The table walks, the faucet sings. His happiness in infinite.

But in a picture from the story book -- the crocodile pulls on the elephant by his nose. Why? Why does he do that?

HIS FATHER - MUSIC

He touches his father's beard.

FATHER
Sandpaper!

His father takes a coin out of his ear. How?

He sits him on his knee and play Horse. Brrumpphh! Up and down they go. He shrieks with delight.

The neighbors have come by. Mr. Bigden makes big faces. The grown-ups are heroes and giants in the earth.

FATHER (CONT'D)
We had the Commander over for dinner -- this little devil bit him on the ankle!

INT. HALL - MUSIC

He wants to go down the dark hall, but he is afraid to by himself. He turns to his mother. She understands, comes forward to take his hand. Overhead, the ceiling opens as the attic fan clicks on.

EXT. FRONT PORCH, OTHER INFANT POVS

He picks the neighbors' tulips and brings them to her in a wagon.

MOTHER
Oh, sweetheart! They belong to our neighbors! But you're very sweet to bring them to your mother. Yes, you are!

She does not frown or scold him. She kisses the bottoms of his feet. She bends over and blows on his tummy to make him laugh. She slips him into his PJs. Lying near her heart, hearing its faint thud, he knows peace.

Their attunement grows. They are wrapped together like two vines. One in soul. Still.

He throws his bottle on the floor. Patiently she fetches it again. She sets two colored balls in front of him. He touches them, and they roll away, as though with a life of their own.

Clouds, grass, sun, water, flower: the world is a rebus. Wordlessly, it speaks with him --

INT. CRIB - NEW CHILD - WINDOW

A crib stands in front of a bright window. A new child lies in it; his brother RL.

How friendly the universe looks to his mother now! A gift from the light! How kind the divinity who favored her this way!

She is born at the same time as her children. She learns from their laughter. She grows up with them.

She whispers a blessing.

Jack looks at his new brother. At first he does not share his mother's pleasure. When will it do something? Will it go back to the hospital?

JACK
Baby night night!

He hears the baby's shouts of joy, its squeals and warbles of delight. Now he must share her love. She holds it instead.

TIGHT ON BOOK OF ANIMALS

Lion, tiger, dog, bird: he names the creatures. She shows them to him in a book, and he names them one by one.

Baby blocks. Letters shaped into new combinations. The world assumes a sense, moves towards a design.

EXT. FRONT YARD - MOVING OUTDOORS FOR THE FIRST TIME

Mother and father plant a sweetgum tree to mark the new baby's birth. They take his picture next to it. The tree's growth will serve as a measure of the children's own.

Far away a bell rings. He rushes out to look for the ice cream truck. His grandmother calls him away from the street. She looks for him, she cannot find him. He understands that he can hide from her. The tension is too great:

JACK
Here's me!

We move in widening circles, farther and farther away from his first, familiar world.

UNDERWATER SHOT (SWIMMING POOL)

Weightless, he bounces through the shallow end of a swimming pool, his feet pushing off the bottom.

MOTHER
Hold your nose! Not out in the deep!

INT. PARENTS' BEDROOM

He sneaks into his parents' bedroom. In a chest of drawers, he discovers his father's campaign ribbons, a commendation from the admiral, scapulars from the Sisters of St. Anne, Chinese money in fantastic denominations. He marvels at the mystery of their separate lives.

Suddenly, he hears a noise. He turns to discover his mother in the doorway.

MOTHER
There's where we keep our things, sweetheart. Leave those alone. All right?

He nods. She overlooks his faults, his fits of willfulness and temper. The music bathes all things in love.

EXT. FIRST SNOW

He reaches out to feel his first snow. She stands behind him, smiles.

ANOTHER DAY - STEVE

He turns around at the sound of a baby's cry.

JACK
Where's his momma?

MOTHER
He's your new brother.

JACK
How many of them will there be?

On closer examination he finds the child fascinating. He touches it, strokes its skin.

EXT. THE CHOW DOG - DUSK

He fears a dog that lives down the street with Howard and Rusty Wells, two neighbors the boys' own age; a chow with a purple tongue and a curling tail. There is a menace in its eyes. The instant it appears, panic enters his blood. His mother feels him clutch her hand more tightly, as though he understood that he were small and vulnerable. She gives him a look to say: I will protect you.

INT. O'BRIEN HOUSE - THE NEW BABY'S CRIB

Jack wants to stroke the new baby, then to pour a glass of water on him. A glance from his mother restrains him.

EXT. THE STICKLEYS' - A PROPERTY LINE

Next door, across a vacant lot teeming with snakes and lizards, stands a dilapidated house. No one has ever seen the owners come in or go out.

FATHER
Stay away. Don't bother them.
That's the Stickleys' property.
Starting at this line.

He looks at the ground, but where the vacant lot leaves off and the Stickleys' yard begins, he cannot tell and does not care.

JACK'S POVS

His parents guard him carefully from the sight of anything which might disturb him. One day, when he sees a man rolling wildly on the ground, his mother puts her hands over his eyes. Sweeping him up into her arms, she carries him away.

He looks at her with a frown. What was in that man?

Bath time. Fear is forgotten. The boys make no effort to cover their nakedness.

Everything is pure and without blemish. All quarrels are hidden from his eyes; all sickness, suffering and death. He knows what Adam did.

CUT, MERTHIOLATE, SPINNING ON THE GRASS, SPINNING FAN

He hears his mother singing in the kitchen.

She catches him by the hands and spins him round and round, until he is so dizzy he can no longer stand up, but stumbles around drunkenly until he sinks down in the grass.

The whirling fan. Water from the hose. He loves all that flows.

The 4th of July: a sparkler makes figures in the night.

Laughter is the dominant tone of this section. Knowledge is delight. Sorrow is a passing thing. All glows from deep within.

He falls and cuts his knee. It hurts when she puts on the drops, but then she blows the pain away.

MOTHER
All right now?

He laughs. With the touch of her hand, she restores him to peace.

SOAP BUBBLES

He blows soap bubbles into the air; wondrous, iridescent. They drift off and are gone. Delight does not last.

Gradually, the subtle radiance passes from things, as though a layer of cloud had come over the sun. Slowly as the dawn, the boy is growing up. Music helps to indicate this change.

Something violent and unfamiliar disturbs him when he sees his mother paying too much attention to his little brother.

Gradually the world enters his life. Little by little, he will come to set great store by things he never dreamt of before.

He snatches a toy away from RL.

JACK
Mine!

JACK'S POVS

RL sees a cat:

RL
Is he scared of kids? What does he do to kids? Does he lick kids?

LAMP

Jack knocks over a lamp. It falls to the floor and breaks. His mother enters the room.

MOTHER
Did you do this? Were you boys horsing around?
(Jack nods)
You always tell the truth. You're a good boy. Be more careful next time.

CRAYON DRAWING

She compliments RL on a drawing he has done. Jack puts his own aside. Already RL is the better artist.

JACK
Who do you love most?

MOTHER
I love you all the same.

JACK
All three?
(she nods)
Can I tell you something he did?

MOTHER
Would he mind your telling me?

So fine a scruple had not occurred to him. He learns from her the subtle ways of honor, truth.

The supreme joy that life can offer is to see her pleased, as when one does well in school, or tells the truth.

EXT. O'BRIEN HOUSE (FRONT YARD)

When some of the neighborhood kids push RL into a puddle, Jack rushes at them with a stick and puts them to flight.

JACK
Clear out!

He flings rocks at the retreating figures. RL looks at him gratefully. As they go back to the house, he puts his arm around his big brother's waist. Music enters.

EXT. O'BRIEN HOUSE (BACKYARD) - MUSIC - DUSK

The family is sitting out on the back terrace. Chicken is cooking in the smoker. She takes RL up into her arms and points toward the horizon. The sun has just set; the sky is a furnace of light.

MOTHER
That's where God lives.

THE OTHER WORLD - MUSIC

The world is not yet something completely known and real. It continues to seem as though some nook or passageway might give them access to another land. One might pry up a floorboard, or at the back of the closet discover some unsuspected room.

That other world: where does it lie? Inside the walls, in the crawl space underneath the house: who might live there? He gets down on his knees and looks through a vent. He peers into a far corner of the attic.

Within his world it seems there is another world; a nest of worlds.

INT. BOYS' ROOM - NIGHT

Night has fallen. Mrs. O'Brien sits by the baby's crib and sings a lullaby.

MOTHER
Bye, baby bunting, Daddy's gone a-
hunting, to get a little rabbit
skin--

She kisses RL goodnight. She shuts out the light. The fan turns back and forth. In their young hearts, she is the name for God.

JACK
Leave it on.

The tiny nightlight watches over their sleep, burning evenly through the long hours until morning.

In the moonlight the bushes assume a tropical size; the leaves are painted silver. You would think the moon had chosen where to shine.

Mrs. O'Brien comes back to give RL an aspirin crushed in a spoonful of molasses.

RL
What's that noise?

MOTHER
Nothing.

RL
Can you push the chest of drawers against the wall?

There is a narrow crack between them. What might slide in through it? Jack feels lean and alone in the vast palace of the night.

MOTHER
Now sleep -- like good boys.

The shadows dance on the ceiling. It is though they were alive. Strange faces peer out at them from the darkness. Nothing stands still. Things come and go, ebb and flow.

STEVE (O.S.)
Why does the moon follow me?

No sooner has she left the room, than the boys are up and about. They bounce on their beds. They inspect the glowing tubes in the back of the radio. They take voyages under the sheets and blankets. They hold a flashlight underneath their faces.

NEW ANGLE

When their mother comes in later, she at first cannot locate them. One child is under his bed, another sleeping on the floor. She lifts them up, and puts them back in their places, kisses them and closes the door.

Light shines through the keyhole. His infancy has passed away, as though in a single day. His innocence is ended.

INT. BOYS' ROOM - FIVE YEARS LATER [2C]

Jack wakes up. All is as it was before. Where was he? The sweetgum tree that was planted at his brother's birth marks the passage of five years.

His eyes until now have been shielded from the sight of evil, suffering and death; his family united, with no hint of contradiction between his mother and father.

The world coheres. Things assume their conventional names and take their customary places. We settle into the main epoch of the story.

Jack is now 11 years old, in 6th grade, his brothers 9 and 6. RL is a gentle boy, loved by all, quiet and generous, with a good sense of humor. Steve is combative, wild, but brave and loyal, too. A title card reads: "TEXAS, 1956".

Where before we kept entirely to the family's house, we now shall venture farther and farther into the neighborhood and eventually out into the town in central Texas where they live, far from the world at large.

The neighbors' yards are shaded by oak trees and surrounded by low hedges that the children have cut gaps through. The O'Brien house stands with five or six others on the last street in a subdivision. Its front is turned towards the other houses. Behind it lie the open woods: rolling hills of juniper, broken here and there by cow pastures.

EXT. NEIGHBORS' LAWNS - SIMPLER TIMES

Now that the heat of the afternoon is past, the neighbors lay their hoses out. The sprinklers start up with a cough. Standing with their sleeves rolled up, the men regard them gravely, each adjusting his faucet until the water falls precisely to the lawn's perimeter.

Rapt as a bird, Jack watches the sprinklers spin round and round, until he hears his mother calling him home.

INT. O'BRIEN HOUSE

She is preparing dinner. She notices that the children have grown steadily more quiet and watchful.

MOTHER
Did you sweep the patio, honey? Did you get your room?

The boys go quickly about their chores. They sweep up the patio and wet it down with a hose to make it look fresh. They pull up a few handfuls of crab grass and leave them in a conspicuous place. Then, in the distance, they see a green Studebaker approaching.

NEW ANGLE

The tires hiss on the concrete. The boys are still and expectant. A moment later their father steps through the front door.

FATHER
Hi, sweetheart! Boys!

He kisses their mother and turns to face them. They do not know quite how to act with him. He catches them up into his arms -- physically shows them every sign of affection -- but they are wary of him and hold themselves apart. They understand that he is devoted to them. He would never abandon them, no, but always protect them. Still they do not trust him.

He pours himself a shot of rye, passes the glass back and forth under his nose, then tosses it down. As soon as his back is turned, the boys slip away.

FATHER (CONT'D)
Wait a minute!

EXT. O'BRIEN HOUSE - LAWN

He shows Jack a patch of their lawn that is overrun with crab grass and burrs.

FATHER
Did you pick the weeds along the side of the house? Or only where I could see?
(Jack shakes his head)
They're back again. You need to pull them up by the roots. You can't just yank off the tops.

He shows Jack what he means. To the child it seems the weeds must run off to th nd of the earth; a labor beyond his strength.

INT. DINING ROOM

The boys look at each other from underneath their eyes as their father says grace.

FATHER
Lord, bless this house, and all those who live within it. Bless this food to our use, and us to thy loving and faithful service, and make us ever mindful of the needs of others. Amen.

Dinner is a nervous time, often a little hell. A symphony is playing on the record player. From time to time Mr. O'Brien leaps up from the table to conduct a passage that has inspired him.

STEVE
Am I dreaming?

JACK
Pass the butter, please.

FATHER
"Pass the butter, please, Sir."

JACK
Sir.

FATHER
So, what did you do today?

JACK
Went to school.

FATHER
After that.

JACK
Nothing.

FATHER
Did you practice your piano?

Jack studies the beads of moisture on his aluminum glass.

FATHER (CONT'D)
What about the yard?

JACK
I picked where you told me to.

FATHER
Did you put in more runners?

JACK
Uh huh.

FATHER
"Yes, Sir." It didn't look like it. We'll see.

The boys regard him warily. His sharp, sarcastic words, and orders so irrational he hardly expects that they will be obeyed.

He never asks what they did at school. He does not know the names of their friends. Were he to inquire, they would suspect it was a trap.

The boys bolt down their food. A shadow passes over Jack's eyes as RL is taken to task. His mother sees this and reaches out to caress his hair. The little knot of anger melts away.

FATHER (CONT'D)
You like that blouse on your mother?

RL
Yes, sir.

FATHER
I got it for her in Saltillo. The same blouse here would cost $40.

RL
Nice.

FATHER
(to Mrs. O'Brien)
I got an urgent message from Tampico. There's a fellow down there who wants to consult with me. He wants to take me fishing on his yacht and get my advice. I told him I was too busy.

MOTHER
Mr. Reese liked Jack's book report and said he wanted him to build a model. He offered to come over and hel

The music has distracted Mr. O'Brien. He leaps from his chair and turns up the volume.

FATHER
What's that playing, sweetheart? It starts with a "B".

She shakes her head. His wild energy sweeps all things before it; he seldom waits for an answer.

FATHER (CONT'D)
What's my favorite food?

MOTHER
Lamb? Fresh peas?

FATHER
No, no! Keep on!

MOTHER
Rice?

FATHER
Right! Okay, start from there. B-R-

She offers no guess. He frowns. Is she defying him?

FATHER (CONT'D)
Brahms! Brahms!

He conducts the music with passionate gestures. He points to the photographs of Toscanini on the record jacket. Sometimes he acts so like a child that the children themselves are embarrassed.

Seeing the look of cold anger in Jack's eyes, he comes over and kisses him. He knows the boys do not like being kissed. He does it anyway; partly, they suspect, for that very reason.

FATHER (CONT'D)
He wrote this in 1883. Everyone told him he was finished, that he would never write a decent piece of music again, so he worked hard and went off in a park -- and sat under a tree. And he saw a deer running under the trees, and it gave him the idea.

The boys eye each other. Everyone knows that he is lying. Doesn't he care?

FATHER (CONT'D)
I read an article about it.

INT. KITCHEN

After dinner, the children scrape their plates and leave them in the sink to soak. They waste no time getting out of the house. They run, afraid that he might call them back.

EXT. NEIGHBORHOOD

The boys clasp each other by the wrists and spin each other round and round, until they are so dizzy that their knees buckle and they fall down in the grass.

RL
Another thing you can do -- press down on the top of your head this way -- then you grow!

They practice heroic, diving catches.

STEVE
Tie me to a tree! Nobody help!
(once this is
done)
Help! Help!

Eventually, RL comes back and unties him.

RL squeezes the trunk of the tree. He feels it rock back and forth in his arms -- knows the savage life beneath its bark.

They string words together to make a magic formula that can cause them to vanish into thin air.

RL
Caleecha Makeecha!

LATER

Fireflies appear beneath the branches. Frogs flop in the cold, drowned grass. The boys wrest the iron lid off the water meter. Beneath it, a toad sits still as a stone.

Against the darkening sky, somewhere beyond the horizon, they begin to make out the red lights of a radio tower.

Jack and RL go looking for the Bates boys. Steve calls out to them to wait up. He wants to come along, too. Jack shakes his head. He will only slow them down.

JACK
Go back and wait on the porch.
Count to fifty, then you come.

RL
Let him come.

Jack considers the request. Maybe they could lure him into a trap or push him off the roof. Steve will do anything they ask of him.

STEVE
Am I dreaming?

JACK
Come on!

GAMES

The splash a big rock makes when it plunges into the water! The pleasure of destroying an ant mound! The burn of a rope racing through your hands!

They play Annie Annie Over with Harry and Joe Bates. Cayler, the kid from Oak Ridge Lane, drifts over. Others follow.

HARRY
You're skinny.

CAYLER
So what?

HARRY
People say I'm short.

They mount their bicycles and skid on the slick parts of the street. Traffic is episodic in this part of town.

Howard Wells appears, a gaunt child who lives in the last house on the block, where the road turns to gravel.

They smoke a vine.

They cut across lawns and through flower beds. Fences mean nothing to them; they make no distinctions of property. They play without permission wherever they choose.

THE STICKLEYS' HOUSE - DUSK

They look through a gate at the Stickleys' house. Even after dark no light burns within it. The boys suspect the occupants must be very peculiar, or have something to hide.

HOWARD
They were here before anybody else moved in. Nobody's ever seen 'em!

JACK
They wouldn't mind a visitor, Howard.

CAYLER
Maybe you should drop in.

RL
They've been waiting for you!

Howard yelps as they push him towards the gate. They laugh and run away.

KIDS
Not It! Not It!

They know the other world in their play. It calls to them, summons them. It seems to want them to find it.

They run through the sprinklers, to feel the water splash up under their chins.

They throw a baseball back and forth over the roof until they can barely see it against the darkening sky.

They play Kick-the-Can. They are out where the pavement ends and the new houses are going up, when they begin to hear their mothers' voices.

MRS. BATES (O.S.)
Harry! Joe!

The other children drift away; first the Bates boys, then Cayler. Finally only Howard Wells is left.

MOTHER (O.S.)
RL! Stevie!

Her lovely voice floats on the evening air.

JACK
We've got to go, Howard.

HOWARD
We can still play on the porch.

He seems reluctant to leave. He hangs around, as though he had nowhere else to play.

RL
Your mom doesn't care what time you get home? You're lucky.

Howard shrugs. Maybe so.

JACK
We've got to go.

Howard gives them a blank, haunted look. Then, without saying a word, he turns and heads home.

The boys can barely make their mother's figure out where she stands by the porch light in the gathering darkness. How pleasant to defy her -- to pretend you have not heard -- to dissolve into the night, where even the dogs are blind.

MOTHER (O.S.)
Come in!

They race around in the dark, making noises. The wind rushes past them. It still wants to play.

STEVE
Scorpions! Scorpion dance!

They dance around, to keep the scorpions who come up onto the warm patio at dusk from stinging them -- leaping about like dervishes, spinning, shrieking with laughter and fear. To be dissolved into something greater, to know a more: this is happiness.

MOTHER
Come in right now, you little potlickers!

A boy named Robert watches from the distance.

INT. LIVING ROOM - NIGHT

They slip quietly toward their bedroom, hoping to avoid their father, who sits by a gooseneck lamp reading the paper.

FATHER
Son? Come here. Reach me my lighter.

He could as easily reach it himself. It seems he wants to harass the child, to demonstrate his authority. Jack glances at his mother, who looks at the ground as soon as she meets his eyes.

JACK
Can't you reach it?

His father does not answer. Jack goes over, picks up the lighter, gives it to him and starts off toward the bedroom.

FATHER
Haven't you forgotten something?

He points to his cheek. The child comes over and gives him a kiss goodnight.

FATHER (CONT'D)
Is that all I get?

Jack kisses him again, coldly, and gives him a hug.

FATHER (CONT'D)
You love your father?

JACK
Yes, sir.

FATHER
Good.

INT. BOYS' ROOM

Jack says goodnight to the rocks in his rock collection. He whispers their names: apatite, chalcedony, azurite, obsidian.

RL (O.S
...and please don't let any catastrophes happen while I'm still alive. Amen.

JACK'S POV ON HIS FATHER - NIGHT

Mr. O'Brien has gone into the living room to play the piano. Jack watches him through a crack in the door.

Their father is an accomplished musician. Their home is never more friendly and at peace than when he sits at the piano, playing Bach or Chopin.

INT. BOYS' ROOM - DAY

Day streams through the windows. The sparrows fuss underneath the eaves.

MOTHER
The laziest boys I've ever seen!

She reaches under the covers and tickles their feet. When this does not work, she comes back with a tray of ice cubes wrapped in a dish towel and lays it against their backs.

RL
No fair!

Jack looks outside. The Studebaker is gone. There is laughter in the kitchen.

JACK
Stevie!

They call to their little brother. When he comes running down the hall, they jerk a rope they have concealed in a seam of the carpet, and he goes sprawling.

He is silent for a moment, then gets up quickly, laughing. Shep races around in mad excitement.

MOTHER
Hurry, or you'll be late!

RL
Mom? Every night do you grow? Mom -- suppose somebody steals our clothes?

MOTHER
Then you'll just have to run home bare-naked!

She pats him on the cheek. He is the gentlest of the boys. When he was an infant, he only wanted to sit on her lap. Jack suspects that he might be her favorite.

EXT. WACO STREET

Jack and RL run to school.

EXT. SCHOOL

They part reluctantly as the first bell rings. No school friend can take a brother's place.

INT. FIFTH-GRADE CLASSROOM

Jack's teacher, Mr. Reese, is a dapper man with a high voice and a Clark Gable moustache. Jack glances around nervously. He has trouble keeping his mind on the lessons; trouble, too, getting along with the other children. He does not know why.

There is a pretty, freckled girl whom he would particularly like to make a good impression on. Her name is Marsha. She is graceful, with long brown hair. Her smile leaves him pleasantly confused.

He listens in rapture as Marsha stands in front of the whole class and sings, "Once I Had a Secret Love."

BOY (O.S.)
She's nice and stuff. I put a roach in her desk.

When he comes upon her alone in the hall -- the opportunity he has been waiting for -- his heart comes to his throat, and he walks past her without saying a word.

EXT. DOWNTOWN STREET - LAME MAN

One afternoon with his mother, Jack sees a lame man hobbling along the sidewalk.

He watches in pity and horror as the man limps away. That shape could be his. Nothing that he knows or possesses could defend him. It might happen at any moment. Without rhyme or reason. It might be right around the corner, or come up from behind.

He turns to his mother:

JACK
Is this a rare thing? Can it happen to anyone?

She looks at him, nods. A trouble comes into his mind. He does not know the cause.

She can make hurt and fear go away. But sickness? What if one of them got sick? What if she herself did?

He remembers a man in the barber shop with one shoe bigger than the other. What did it hide, that big shoe?

INT. LIVING ROOM - GRANDMOTHER

Some days afterwards his grandmother is visiting. Her bright spirits do not distract him from noticing her arthritic hands, the veins in her arms, her bunioned feet projecting off the end of the ttoman. Again, he feels a strange pity, that is mixed with a certain horror, too. Is this his fate? His mother's? Why does no one speak of what haunts him? He cannot believe that he might die, or ever lie in the grave. No, death does not apply to him. His mother reassures him:

MOTHER
We all get old. It's nothing to be frightened of.

JACK
Like that? Will you?
(she nods)
Will I?

MOTHER
Everyone. Look at Shep!

He remembers Austin, the skinny boy who could not stop pacing. He remembers a woman shouting at her boyfriend on a downtown street, and a crazy woman who called him over to see a baby carriage with a doll stretched out in it.

It seems there are things he can no longer escape with a leap into her lap. The world is a burning house.

And still her smile quickly cheers him. He forgets what he saw.

GRANDMOTHER
You let these kids run wild.

MOTHER
They're so curious, Mom -- so anxious to learn. I spend most of my time trying to stop fights between them. What a ful! They're like wild horses.

GRANDMOTHER
No discipline. There's the biggest change in those boys when their dad comes home! Little devils!
(to Steve)
I know you!

EXT. NEIGHBORHOOD - DDT TRUCK

STEVE
The DDT truck!

Already other kids are running behind the truck which periodically passes through the neighborhood to spray for mosquitoes. Jack and RL laugh and shout and wave their arms, running joyfully in and out of the cloud of insecticide. The driver laughs and waves as though he were driving an ice-cream truck. Howard does not look at Jack when he asks:

HOWARD
You want to spend the night at my house?

EXT. WELLS' HOUSE - DUSK

Howard leads Jack towards his house. In the fading light it appears oddly solitary. No light shines from within.

INT. WELLS' HOUSE

Jack had looked forward to coming here. But his heart sinks as he enters the house for the first time. The heavy drapes are drawn tight shut. One breathes an atmosphere of sorrow, an air of insufferable gloom. The mere contemplation of the dark Spanish furniture, the mounted antelope heads and limp, dusty magazines unnerves him.

There are stacks of old papers here and there. Cardboard boxes stand in the corner, yet unpacked. The living room is like an attic; the lights are dim, and the lampshades yellow with age. There are withered roses in a vase. No life here, only a memory of life.

Howard is shy enough when they are playing, but now he seems especially silent and afraid. He looks around anxiously for some game to play.

Mrs. Wells knocks things over in the kitchen, weaving as she prepares their dinner. She wears a bathrobe. Jack does not get a clear look at her.

HOWARD
She said we could do anything we want.

They walk on a table. They drink pop and play with knives. Howard even throws a knife into the back of a door.

JACK
Where's your dad, Howard?

Howard makes a gesture as though to say: He just took off! Went! Jack sees that Mrs. Wells is in her bedclothes, though it is not time for bed. He turns to Howard, who looks away. He gazes at Mrs. Wells with astonishment and dread. He is careful to spare Howard's feelings and smiles awkwardly.

A few minutes later, he asks Howard if he can use the phone. Howard nods. Jack calls his mother. He takes care to speak softly. Howard is standing nearby but, with an exquisite consideration, he turns away.

JACK (CONT'D)
Mother, Can I come home?

MOTHER (O.S.)
What's the matter, hon?

JACK
Nothing. I can walk.

Howard does not seem surprised. He makes no protest.

Jack shakes his hand, in an awkward effort to reassure him of his friendship. Rusty peers out of his room at the older boys. He has been quiet the whole time.

EXT. WELLS HOUSE - DUSK

Jack goes home, dragging his blanket behind him. The Wells' chow dog watches but does not chase him. The unhappy house looms in the background as the whistle of a distant train pierces the stillness.

INT. O'BRIEN HOUSE - NIGHT

Jack throws himself into his mother's arms.

JACK
There's nothing like that, is there?

She frowns. He cannot tell her what is disturbing him. Things no longer speak with one voice. He has descended into the world of duality.

INT. BOYS' ROOM

That night his mother says a prayer by their beds; a rare occurrence. While she hears their prayers, she does not often join in them. They glance at each other.

JACK
Mother, which one of us do you love most?

MOTHER
I love you all three the same.

JACK
But -- we don't care -- who most?

She laughs and kisses RL's feet.

JACK (CONT'D)
How can you do that? It's disgusting.

MOTHER
Well, I'm sorry. His feet were cold.

JACK
Yeah, but you don't kiss them!

RL teases his brother with a glance.

She reads the story of Peter Rabbit to the younger boys. She has done so a hundred times before. It is the only story they ask to hear.

MOTHER
"...But don't go into Mr. MacGregor's garden. Your father had an accident there; he was put in a pie by Mrs. MacGregor."

Now only Jack is still awake.

MOTHER (CONT'D)
What's you favorite part of school?

JACK
Lunch.

She looks at RL who lies nearby.

MOTHER
You love your little brother, don't you?

JACK
Uh huh. I don't know how far he'll get.

MOTHER
What do you mean?

JACK
When we're out in the woods, he just likes to gawk at the fish. And sometimes --

MOTHER
What?

JACK
-- he doesn't stick up for himself, or hit back. What's going to happen to him?
(she smiles)
You can talk him out of his money or whatever he has in his pocket. He kept a dead minnow in his wallet. Just thinking about it makes me want to throw up. I'm not kidding.

She laughs. At the same time, it troubles her to see the first signs of self in him. She knows the way this road must lead.

Whether it be his grandmother, or Mrs. Wells in her draped rooms, or the lame man downtown, Jack quickly forgets every disturbance in the mystery that comes punctually at the end of the day, when the world melts away and he enters the land of forgetting.

INT. DINING ROOM - WITH IDEALIZED IMAGES OF OTHER HOMES

Mr. O'Brien clinks a glass with his spoon to get their attention.

FATHER
Lord, bless this house. May there be peace within its walls . May all who live here be true to each other. And please be good to Ed, my brother. He's been good to hundreds of people. Amen.
(after a pause)
Take your elbows off the table.

JACK
I was going to.

FATHER
You defy me.

JACK
What's that?

FATHER
You know.

One does not feel his anger is caused by this trifle of putting one's elbows on the table, but that it was there to begin with. It does not last long. A moment later he might be showing them affection. Kissing them. Pinching their butts. They do not like it, but he does not seem to care.

FATHER (CONT'D)
It's how I was raised!

He has a taste for hot peppers. The imprint of his kisses burns their cheeks.

FATHER (CONT'D)
Why are you whimpering?

STEVE
I felt a scorpion crawl up my back.

FATHER
Nonsense.

STEVE
It happened the other night. I squeezed him till he was dead.

The older boys laugh.

FATHER
You may leave the table.

He turns to Jack.

FATHER (CONT'D)
Will you continue to defy me? I need to know. Either you take me into your confidence, as a son should his father, or --wait, you're interrupting me -- I'm not done yet. Do you think I can finish? Thank you, your majesty.

Jack grinds his teeth.

FATHER (CONT'D)
You could do these simple things if you really wanted to. Say "Sir". Not slam the screen door. I'll give you one more chance. Are you a good boy? Then do as I ask. Obey your father.

He rules the world from his chair at the head of the table. His opinion is correct. He can tell others how to order their lives, what they should do. Every other opinion is willful, mad.

INT. HALL

Later, Jack overhears his mother and father whispering in the living room.

MOTHER (O.S.)
You haven't filed an income tax return for the last three years... gambled our savings away...cards...

FATHER (O.S.)
With you have an equal chance. Besides, I've denied myself. I have the right to a few pleasures!

Jack approaches the door to the living room, slightly ajar.

MOTHER (O.S.)
You're never home. I don't know whether it's good or bad...

FATHER (O.S.)
...throw it back in my face!

MOTHER (O.S.)
We loved each other. I thought it would last forever. I wanted to die in your arms. You remember how happy we were. You remember --

Jack does not stir. He knew something was amiss. He never suspected it might be anything so dark and unfathomable.

MOTHER (O.S.) (CONT'D)
I thought I could make you love me, but I see you can't do that. I don't know what makes somebody love you, but it's not something you do. You don't get it by being kind or generous or anything like that --

Bugs dive into the screens and bounce off with a thrum. The fight leaps and lurches about. As Jack approaches the door, their words gradually become more coherent, until at last we cut to them inside the living room.

MOTHER (CONT'D)
They get anxious when they know you on your way home. They jump around. You discipline them too much. You expect them to act like adults. You expect things of them they can't possibly achieve.

FATHER
They learn respect.

MOTHER
That's not how to get them to respect you. Can't you see they're afraid of you -- their own father?

FATHER
You don't back me up. They have ten times what we ever did.

MOTHER
You're never happy with anything they do.

MOTHER (CONT'D)
There's always something wrong with it. Even your own mother told you so!

FATHER
Leave her out of this!

Jack sees RL is awake, sits down beside him and hugs him close. RL studies a compass. The needle moves without being touched.

MOTHER (O.S.)
We can't keep on like this. We're driving each other crazy. Why do you act like such a tyrant?

She suffers from his injustice toward the children, from his dark, inexplicable rages. She feels herself, everything, being annihilated by him. She has lost her freedom.

FATHER (O.S.)
You want to see what a tyrant is like?

He cannot break free of her. She is the rock on which he stands. Yet she will not be one with him.

He seems to come apart inside. A lust for destruction fills his blood. Yet what does he have in life but her? Nothing.

RL
What is Mom crying about?

JACK
She's not crying.

RL
Listen.

JACK
Well, she won't cry for long.

RL
Why are they that way?

INT. LIVING ROOM

The next day the boys are very solicitous of their mother. They fix her a sandwich and bring her a cup of tea.

She keeps her pain to herself. Whom can she confide in? Neighbors talk, and she would alarm those whom she loves. She is lonely, far from her own people. In shorthand, for discretion's sake, she jots down her thoughts.

EXT. O'BRIEN HOUSE - CLOTHESLINE

Jack watches her set the laundry out to dry.

MOTHER
What are you thinking, hon?

JACK
Nothing.

She begins to chase him; a girl again. He runs around the house, breathless with delight. Then, all at once, he does not hear her. When he goes back to look for her, she jumps out of the shadows. He does not lau

JACK (CONT'D)
Don't fight with Dad.

She looks away, embarrassed. How much does he know? His heart aches for her, constantly. She feels him back of her, waiting on her, bearing what part of the burden he can.

EXT. O'BRIEN HOUSE - LAWN

Mr. O'Brien inspects the lawn.

FATHER
Get clear to the edge.

JACK
There's so much. All crab grass. I can't. I won't.

FATHER
Are you sure?

Jack looks away, backing down. He hates himself for it. Later, he watches his father strop a straight razor.

EXT. BRAZOS RIVER

His father is teaching him how to swim, mocking his fears, calling him farther, out into the deep. His feet are barely able to touch the muddy rocks at the bottom.

There is no one on the shore. No one to see.

FATHER
Come out. Farther.

Why? Jack gasps for air. Would his father -- Why so far?

FATHER (CONT'D)
Swim.

A POV looking up from the depths. What lies below?

JACK
Was that a water moccasin?

FATHER
Did you see the head and that's all? That's a turtle.

Later, dressing together, he looks at his father's powerful body. He is weak and slight while his father is strong.

EXT. O'BRIEN HOUSE - LAWN - DUSK

He picks crab grass at the edge of the yard. Tears come to his eyes. The oak tree looks down as though in sympathy.

INT. LIVING ROOM - DUSK

He almost has made his way through the living room when his father puts down the newspaper.

FATHER
Did you get it all?

Jack nods. He deceives his father. This way is better, though it hurts his sense of honor. He still tells his mother the truth.

JACK
I lie (apart) to him.

MOTHER
Don't. I've told lies myself. I've tried it. It's not the best way.

INT. KITCHEN - TIGHT ON HANDS

Jack has divided a cupcake his mother baked into two portions. Steve waits for his. Turning to Jack, she asks:

MOTHER
Are they equal? Give him the piece you want.

It is a revelation.

She sends the boys out with raspberries with instructions to leave them on Mrs. Stickley's front step.

INT. BOYS' ROOM - NIGHT

Tonight it is their father who comes to visit them before they go to sleep. He turns the gooseneck lamp towards the wall and amuses them by making silhouettes on it with his hands. A duck! A bear! A dog! He makes their faces up with a burnt cork. Steve gets to blow out the match. Now discord seems a dream. Why can't it be this way every night -- in the daytime, too?

FATHER
(to Jack)
I remember when you were born. They wouldn't let me come home! The Navy said: "An officer must be present at the laying of the keel, but not at the launching"!

He gets up to leave.

RL
Sit with us.

He shakes his head, and moves to the door.

STEVE
Don't close it all the way.

Jack listens as his father plays the piano. His brothers are asleep. How ravishing the music sounds as it comes floating down the hall. How strange that there should be such tenderness in a man otherwise so coarse, so unreasonable! That one who professes to love you should cause you injury and suffering, yet appear not to care that he does!

HIGH DOWN ANGLE- HELICOPTER SHOT - SCREECH OWL

The music flows out through the windows into the night. The camera rises over the neighborhood, which lies in peace beneath the stars.

INT. PARENTS' BEDROOM - THE NEXT MORNING

Mr. and Mrs. O'Brien talk in low voices. They have turned on the fan to assure the privacy of their conversation.

MOTHER
You fight with the men above you -- you laugh at them -- then wonder why they don't promote you.

FATHER
It's fools they put ahead of me. Liars. They pass over me.

MOTHER
And the men underneath you -- you work them too hard!

FATHER
Morale is great. Sometimes they work thirty-six hours at a stretch -- don't even ask for overtime! You don't know what it's like. Always following orders of men you can't respect. They want you to scheme for their favor. It makes you less than a man.

EXT. KIMBALLS' HOUSE

The next afternoon a large black grackle appears in the oak tree and, shortly afterward, they discover Robert sitting on the fence; a mean child who it seems lives on a street far away; they are not quite sure where.

RL
Who's that?

From a hiding place, Robert shoots the Kimballs' German shepherd with a BB gun. The poor creature, normally so proud and threatening, looks about, wondering where the blow is coming from; defenseless against it; now reduced to a cringing, whimpering mass. Robert smiles.

EXT. STICKLEYS' HOUSE

The Stickleys' house is not up to the standard of the rest of the neighborhood. The free-standing garage is unpainted, its windows opaque.

ROBERT
Let's us bust 'em.

RL
Why?

ROBERT
Why? Just 'cause.

Jack mumbles some words about his mother having forbidden it.

ROBERT (CONT'D)
You afraid, boy?
(after a pause)
You don't need to tell her, do you?
Nobody needs to know but us
chickens. I broke a window once.
Didn't nothing happen to me.
Chicken ain't nothing but a bird!
(later)
Why let them keep you from having
fun? Why not do what you wanta do?

Robert punches another boy on the arm. The boy runs off howling.

JACK
Why'd you do that?

ROBERT
I'm not him. What do I care?

The strange boy fascinates Jack with his amused contempt for others, his nonchalance, his sensitivity to anything which wounds his pride, his refusal to play a hypocritical part.

Later, they find themselves alone.

ROBERT (CONT'D)
Hold out your elbow.

He is lucid, calm and cynical. There is an odd, motiveless malignity in him.

ROBERT (CONT'D)
I said, hold it out.

As though a hypnotist had commanded it, Jack holds out his elbow. Robert raps it with the handle of a screwdriver. Jack pushes him away, surprised. Robert pushes him back. Does he really want to fight?

Jack hesitates. When someone hits you, are you supposed to hit him back? How else prevent him from doing it again?

Trembling, he turns and walks away.

INT. LIVING ROOM - LATER THAT EVENING

His mother is dressed up to go out. She has come to tell them goodnight. She is very lovely, but her black gloves and veil make her seem unfamiliar to the boys.

MOTHER
What is it?

RL
Why are you wearing those?

MOTHER
We're going out.

RL
Take them off!

She does. Her hands are restored to their natural beauty.

STEVE
Can I touch your earrings?

She lets him. The boys look dolefully at her.

JACK
Don't go. We can fix you dinner.

MOTHER
We'll be back by twelve.

INT. O'BRIEN HOUSE - JACK'S POV

The Studebaker grows smaller in the distance. Will there be a time when they might be separated from her forever?

They bounce on the beds and have a pillow fight. Their uncle is the babysitter. He lets them do anything they please while he talks on the phone in the other room.

INT. O'BRIEN HOUSE - LATER

Later that night Jack wakes up to a muffled noise of anger in the living room. He sits up in his bed. Outside the trees swash back and forth, filling him with a sense of terror.

He slips out of bed and peers through a crack in the door, into the living room.

MOTHER (O.S.)
...We needed it. We did!

Mr. O'Brien rages up and down the hall. He swings between extremes of behavior, one moment acting like a fool, then suddenly remembering that he is the father of a family.

His high-minded struggle against his shortcomings never lasts for long, however. He is of too impulsive a nature.

He simply cannot stand the idle life of a penitent in the bosom of his own family, and he always ends up rebelling against it.

Jack sees his brothers are awake. He strokes their backs, to comfort them. What has their father done? What is he capable of? The screen door slams.

Jack sees tears in his mother's eyes. She looks up with a start. He takes her hand.

MOTHER (CONT'D)
I thought you were asleep.

JACK
Why are you crying, Mother? sweet Mother!

MOTHER
I was thinking about your father. Missing him.

JACK
I know you're crying now, but someday you won't. Someday we're going to -- help you --
(how?)
Can I get you something to drink?

How is she to get close to her husband? This is a slow starvation. She has almost resigned herself to loneliness and isolation. She is determined that the children should know nothing of her troubles. They are anxious enough as it is.

Jack runs to his bedroom and gathers up his savings, twenty or thirty dollars in coins. He gives them to her in a jar.

She touches him on the cheek. She avoids his eyes.

He knows the misery of nights. He sees her eyes dark and pinched with torture; she whom he loves more than life; she whom he would die to save from any hurt.

JACK (CONT'D)
We're all right. We won't ever leave you, Mom.

MOTHER
Thank you.

JACK
We won't ever do anything to make you unhappy. I promise.

Later, hearing her voice in the other room, it strikes him that some day he might be left to himself in this world. In a whisper, he prays:

JACK (CONT'D)
Help me not be mean. Help me not to sass my Dad --

EXT. O'BRIEN HOUSE - LAWN

The next day, Mr. O'Brien inspects Jack's yard-work.

FATHER
Shake the dirt off the roots so it doesn't leave a hole. That's too hard, I guess... And over here, why haven't you watered the corners? You haven't had time, of course! Look, this is cropped so close it's going to burn out. Keep it watered. Why's this bare?

JACK
The grass won't grow under the trees.

His soul is seared into a rage. Nothing is enough.

FATHER
It does at the Kimballs'.

JACK
They have a yardman.

FATHER
(defensively)
They have money. Kimball inherited it. All day I'm at the office! It seems you can put in a few hours out here. You want me to go over it again? What are you smiling about? I know what you're thinking.

JACK
You do?

FATHER
I don't want you to say a word until you're done. I'll be very disappointed if you do. I won't know about it. Of course, you could fool me.

He has the unshakable belief that he must approve or modify everything the children do. He is full of petty and exasperating cautions. Watch it! Step there. Open the door!

EXT. GARAGE - A CAT

The boys find a cat and take it up onto the roof of the garage. It writhes in their hands. Its look of terror gives them a faint thrill of pleasure.

RL
We might hurt it --

JACK
They always land on their feet.

Cayler nods. He, too, is curious to see how the cat will react to the fall. It yowls and lands with a thud, shakes itself and walks off slowly. RL glances at Jack with a new distrust.

Jack looks away. Where before it seemed all evil lay outside, now with a growing dread he sees that it might lie within him, too.

He cheats to win, yet he is angry when others cheat him.

RL
(playing guns)
I got you!

JACK
No, you didn't. I was just wounded!

How can he object to the evil in others, when he does those very things which in them he deplores?

Robert watches from afar.

INT. BOYS' ROOM

His mother answers him. Most of her words play against scenes of their everyday life.

MOTHER
Treat everyone as you'd like to be treated. Help each other. Encourage each other. Love everyone. Every leaf. Every ray of light. You boys are the pride of my life!

MOTHER (CONT'D)
The reason I'm saying all this is that I don't want you to waste ten years of your life learning to know yourself and the reason for your difficulties, as your mother did. It's hard to stand by and see your children make the same mistakes you made. I hope you won't, sweetheart.

Jack remembers holding a toy out to RL, inviting him to take it, then snatching it away again, teasing him, expecting him to cry, astonished that he smiles instead.

MOTHER (CONT'D)
Once I dreamed of becoming a doctor.

RL
Why didn't you?

MOTHER
Things didn't work out.

JACK
I don't get it.

MOTHER
What don't you get?

JACK
The whole thing.

MOTHER
Well, you have a lot to learn, and you can't learn it all at once.

FATHER'S POV

Mr. O'Brien sees how the boys dote on their mother. He waves Jack and RL over to the car.

INT. MOVING CAR - WEALTHY NEIGHBORHOOD

They are out for a drive. They pass a big house.

JACK
Who lives there?

FATHER
Frank Johnson. He started out as a barber, but he built something big. Never let anything stop him.

FATHER (CONT'D)
Bucky, who runs the company now, he started out on an ice truck. He even got fired a couple of times.

Jack and RL have never seen any of these men, but they are mythical figures in the boys' imagination.

FATHER (CONT'D)
Bucky asked me once if I wanted to go deer hunting with him. I said no. In front of all his top people! He asked me why. I said I can't stand to hunt, it makes me sick. You should've seen the look on their faces! You know what Bucky told me? He was quiet for a minute, then he said: "You know, I've never liked it that much either. Maybe I won't go this year."

Jack looks away, embarrassed. The boys need no proof of their father's superiority.

FATHER (CONT'D)
A corporation has no soul. They'll cut their own grandmother's throat. It has to be that way. Merciless. But, if you take their money, you have to take their --

INT. RESTAURANT

Jack burns with embarrassment as Mr. O'Brien complains to a waitress about their food, then kisses her hand for serving them well. He makes a big show of giving her a tip, holding the money out, then pulling it away when she reaches for it. Oddly, she does not mind all this as much as Jack does, but laughs it off as play.

INT. MOVING CAR - LATER

JACK
Why do you work so hard?

FATHER
So you'll have a place to stand. I might not amount to anything, but you will. You boys will stand on my shoulders.

THEIR POVS - DOWNTOWN & POOR PARTS OF TOWN (BARTLETT, ETC.)

The city, which at first seemed glorious to Jack, is a mystery to him now, with its freight yards and grain elevators, its blind men, cripples and drunks shouting from the doorways.

FATHER
The world lives by trickery. If you want to succeed, you can't be too good.

They reach the poor parts of town. His father has come to buy some barbecue. There are rundown shacks and cars parked in front yards. A black man stares at him.

FATHER (CONT'D)
Belong to yourself: that's the whole thing in life. Learn to master yourself. Your will. Your will makes you free. Set up your will as a law over you!

Later Jack sees a team of workers, digging a ditch. Worms lie on the heaps of dirt, cut in two by their shovels. Jack's heart is moved to pity at the sight of the writhing creatures. And then to see these men with their bodies bent, their hair disheveled, their faces glistening with sweat, their hands and arms covered with clay.

It seems that suffering must lie at the heart of life, not at its periphery; it is not some accident that troubles the unfortunate only. No, inconstancy is the rule. The fading rose. The uprooted tree.

FATHER (CONT'D)
See those people. Somebody got the upper hand with them. Don't let it happen to you. You've got to get ahead of the other guy. He'll be doing all he can to do the same to you.

Jack exchanges a look with his brother, riding in the back seat. They observe everything about him which is ridiculous, then mimic and exaggerate these features for each other.

FATHER (CONT'D)
Money will break down all obstacles in your way. Hold on to it. It's the most reliable thing there is in this world. A friend is likely to betray you. Money never will.

FATHER (CONT'D)
Find the thing they can't do without. Patents!

As his father goes on, Jack's thoughts turn to their dog. Shep's is a perfect love. He is their friend, their clown, their guardian and protector. He accepts being teased, slighted, ignored. He knows no unhappiness, like the three-legged dog who lives down the block and runs around as though no misfortune had ever befallen him.

INT. LIVING ROOM - JACK'S POVS - LATER

Jack listens as his father questions his mother about a bent spoon.

FATHER
Who did this?
(turning on RL)
I might enjoy lazing around, too. I could walk out the front door and say I was going to pick blackberries! Just wave goodbye and wander off. No, you want to be served, but you don't want to have any responsibilities in return. You're going to have a record, and it's going to follow you around the rest of your life. On it will be the grades you made -- what you accomplished and what you didn't. People read it. If you mess up, you might not be able to get a security cle ice. People will ask why.

One knows he will awaken, come to himself at last. It will be dreadful when he does. Could he endure a full awakening? Would it destroy him?

EXT. OAK TREE

Outside, Jack climbs the live oak tree. Higher and higher he goes, until he stands like a sailor on top of a mast. There he may commune with himself. The world below seems small and unreal.

The door bursts open. His father storms outside and sits on the porch. A few moments later, RL comes outside. He sits down beside his father and rests his head against his shoulder.

Jack watches. He wonders if he could love his father, too --

EXT. BATES' HOUSE - SERIES OF ANGLES

The Bates live in harmony. He never passes their house without receiving a benediction. Mr. Bates plays football with the boys, and Mrs. Bates serves them cookies at the end of the afternoon. Theirs is a happy home, with nothing to hide.

MRS. BATES
Are you sure your mother isn't wondering where you are?

JACK
No, Ma'am -- she's ok

He sees how Mr. Bates draws his sons close, hugs them tenderly, strokes their hair.

INT. EPISCOPAL CHURCH

The next morning, Mr. O'Brien sits at the organ in church. He seems calm and untroubled. He loves the winding toccatas and fugues, the candles, the stillness of the choir loft before the service, the music swelling out majestically as he presses down the keys. His will relaxes. He ceases to fret. All is as it should be. Why not always so?

Why do people oppress each other? Why are they not faithful to the best in themselves?

The camera rises over the ranks of pipes, over the gladiolas and the stained glass windows. Jack marvels at this father: a man who for all his faith and vitality suffers from a deep disquiet, as though not even being God-fearing and pious could bring peace to his soul.

His fingers work the keys, his feet walk up and down the pedals. Jack reads the music, turns the pages, pulls the stops. At such moments they are bound together in harmony.

Later, Jack walks in the church, alone. His footsteps are loud in the silence. A sparrow, caught inside the building, flies through the rafters and beats its wings against a high windows, trying to find a way out.

EXT. CHURCH GROUNDS - BELL

Mr. Singh, the sexton, is taking down the flag.

RL (O.S.)
He rings the bell when you die.

Jack watches as his father talks with a vestryman. Mr. O'Brien shows a courtesy and a desire to please that the boys do not often see in him. In the end he bids the stranger an obsequious goodbye.

FATHER
A friend of mine. He owns half the real estate in town.

Sunday is a day of rest and relaxation. Other families may drop by to visit, unannounced. The stores are closed, as people take their ease. Yet Mr. O'Brien is restless, tense. They are having dinner on the porch when he turns to RL:

FATHER (CONT'D)
Will you do something for me? You promise me that you'll do it, without asking what it is? Just have the confidence that what your father asks of you is right?
(RL nods)
For the next half hour, will you not speak unless you have something important to say?
(turning to Steve)
And what did you do today, my fine-feathered friend?

One by one, each child is called upon to justify himself. Where does it come from, this pleasure in humiliation? This indifference to their dignity and even to his own? He deceives others, debases himself in order to impress them -- makes up stories, facts, the etymologies of words, without a trace of shame.

FATHER (CONT'D)
Sit on the front two inches of your chair. It's good for your posture. I read it in the paper.

He holds up a rock before Jack's eyes, a thunder egg from the children's collection, a sort of polished agate.

FATHER (CONT'D)
You actually bought this from Mr. Ledbetter? Don't explain. Just nod. Yes or no.

JACK
He gave it to me. That one's my favorite.

FATHER
I don't know how long I can keep paying for these rocks. We're living in a fancy neighborhood, but we can't afford this house. If Kimball next door knew what our situation was, he would laugh. Of course, he got all his money from his father-in-law.

RL
Be quiet. Please.

FATHER
What did you say?

Mr. O'Brien takes a hot pepper and rubs it on the child's lips. Mrs. O'Brien rises to her feet in anger.

FATHER (CONT'D)
You will straighten up and fly right!

Jack has never seen his father possessed in quite this way. His brother's cries are unbearable. The innocent one has no defense.

JACK
Leave him alone!

His father looks up, astonished. Jack strikes him with his fist, steps back and stares at him defiantly. His father slaps him across the face.

MOTHER
Stop!

FATHER
Keep your voice down. The neighbors can hear. Children aren't reasonable. They can only be governed by fear.

MOTHER
How can you be so cruel!

FATHER
I give my life for them. My blood. I let them eat my heart. Do I tie them to a tree? Do I take off my belt -- like McKeever? They have their lives from me!

He will force them to love him, whether they like it or not.

RL is put in a closet. Mrs. O'Brien's blood rises in a fever as she clutches Steve in her arms. She wonders if her husband does not take some pleasure in punishing the boys. The moral tortures are harder on them than the physical ones. His suspicious glances, his mouth curling in scorn, the sentimentality that so quickly spills over into cruelty.

What is she to do? Confronting him only makes the situation worse. He will stop at nothing to win an argument.

MOTHER
(later)
You hardly know them. You're gone all the time.

FATHER
I have to support my family.

MOTHER
You speak without listening to them. You never listen to anyone else. You interrupt. There's no length you won't go to get your way.

She looks at him as one who once loved him and no longer does; so it seems to him.

FATHER
If it's such a hell, why don't you leave?

She suspects that he wants to degrade her because he has never been able to possess her soul. Always she has managed to move beyond his reach.

MOTHER
What about them? Wouldn't I have gone long ago, except for them! Haven't I been sorry that I didn't!

FATHER
What are you waiting for?

MOTHER
I would be only too glad to get away from you --

She cannot control her words. They fly out of her mind like sparks.

FATHER
You left me long ago.

MOTHER
Keep your voice down.

FATHER
You turned away from me -- the day your first child was born.

He suspects that she hates him. It causes him to offend her violently.

MOTHER
Coming home late -- gambling their future away. You took the money RL saved from his paper route -

FATHER
I put it back. I'm an outsider to you, aren't I? You hold yourself apart. Proud of your virtue. You want to make me better than I am.

Why can she not be content with what he is? Why will she only have him as he ought to be?

MOTHER
You're always so angry. Why?

FATHER
I want a life without lies.

MOTHER
What is eating at you?

FATHER
Nothing. Do I disgust you?

MOTHER
I love you.

FATHER
Maybe you don't.

She risks less than he does. She has her worth, which she can never lose. And the children, whom he does not have.

FATHER (CONT'D)
You put them up to your tricks. You teach them to hate me! Their own father!

Her blood rises in a jet. Jack listens. Will theirs be a family like Howard's? The world is darker than he imagined.

How shall he comfort his mother? Redeem her sorrow? He thinks of Christmas, when home is home, when for a day they are a family, the bright colors beneath the tree, lights burning late into the night.

He plays with a flashlight, shining it through his hand, exposing the bones of his fingers.

INT. BOYS' ROOM - LATER

The boys cower in their room. Mr. O'Brien bangs his fist on the formica as Mrs. O'Brien sobs.

FATHER
Isn't a wife supposed to love, cherish, obey?

Jack fears his father's wild energy. He has got to fight him every inch of the way, in order not to be swamped, engulfed -- to stay alive. He clings to RL and Steve. He will never leave his brothers.

JACK
(in a whisper)
We have each other.

BACK TO PARENTS

Shame has come over Mr. O'Brien. He has fallen. She knows it. She suffers from his fall more than he does.

FATHER
Bach's sons revered him -- kissed his hands! They played music together for hours on end. Their home was a haven of peace! Jubilation! I can't get them to touch the piano.

He is pitiless, but she will not be swayed. The purity of her conduct is her strength. She will not give him the right to despise her.

He touches her cheek, kisses her. Nothing is mended. He made up his mind long ago not to understand.

Later, a sense of her own loneliness comes over her as she reads a letter from her brother.

EXT. KIMBALLS' CLOTHESLINE

Alone, Jack walks past a neighbor's clothesline. White underclothes hang among the sheets and towels.

Jack remembers going by the Browns one night in search of an overthrown ball, how he saw Mr. Brown strike his wife in the presence of their children. No one else witnessed the event. The Browns had been a family whose happiness was taken for granted. It now seems to Jack that behind the calm facade of ordinary life, there might lie something dark and shameful.

EXT. WOODS

The woods are full of drafts, like a spring fed pool. Jack walks under the trees, seeking a presence he has known here before.

Nature is free and without blemish. The rustling leaves refresh his shattered nerves. Their spirit is his mother's own. A presence, yes. It speaks. Come, it says; find me. In me you will discover that which does not fail or disappoint. An unseen hand ceaselessly touches his face, his heart.

How to see as the oak tree does?

EXT. O'BRIEN HOUSE

The brothers are playing after school.

RL
It's going to rain.

JACK
Who says?

RL
I can make it rain.

The sky is blue. But RL does a little dance, inviting the clouds to come. Later on they do. The rain pours down. RL is modest in his victory. Jack laughs. Now trouble seems a dream.

RL (CONT'D)
I don't lie that much.

Gazing at his brother, he hears the same voice which he heard among the trees. It beckons him. Where?

THE NEXT DAY

Mr. O'Brien seems to have forgotten yesterday's scene at the dinner table. Not the children. Nor his wife. It lies across the family like a shadow.

FATHER
Give me a kiss.

RL does.

EXT. KIMBALLS' HOUSE - WIND CHIMES

Some days later Jack hears the tinkling of the wind chimes at the Kimballs' house. Wandering towards it, he notices their car pulling away. He waits, then cautiously he enters their garage. A door leads from the laundry room into the house. He looks around to see in anyone is watching, then quietly he opens it.

INT. KIMBALLS' HOUSE

He wanders through the unfamiliar rooms. The house ticks in the heat. There is money on the kitchen counter, but he ignores it. With a mounting dread he approaches the stairs that lead up to the sleeping quarters.

What lies up there? He touches the banister but dares not go further. After a moment, he retreats back the way he came.

He stands outside in the sunlight, stunned. What else is he capable of?

INT. KITCHEN

His mother sees that he is troubled.

MOTHER
What is it? Tell me.

JACK
Nothing.

She goes back to what she was doing. He feels queasy and confused for having told a lie.

JACK (CONT'D)
I went in the Kimballs' house. They weren't there.

MOTHER
Why did you do it? You can't go in when they aren't there.

JACK
The door was open.

MOTHER
They leave it open because they expect you won't go in. Never do it again. Promise me. Thank you.

JACK
Are you going to tell Dad?

She hesitates a moment, then shakes her head. With her there is forgiveness. Whether or not you ask for it. Whether or not you deserve it.

LATER THAT NIGHT

A figure stands by his bed that night. He touches the crown of his head.

INT. LIVING ROOM

His father gives Jack a lecture.

FATHER
Don't try to make people love you. Make them fear you. If someone clips you, sock him back. Who can you trust? Your own family. Be good to them. That's enough. Your mother is naive. It takes fierce will to get ahead in this world. Don't let anyone stand in your way.

MOTHER
(looking in)
He needs to get to school.

FATHER
This is more important. This is school. Please.
(after she leaves)
Don't let your own laziness stand in your way. You don't have to -- pardon the expression -- kiss anyone's derriere. Nobility is a luxury. Avoid controversy. Every one of these top executives, you know how they get to where they are? They float it down the middle of the river.

Mother and father live inside him. They wrestle for his soul. He strives to reconcile them, but they refuse to be reconciled. Why can he not find a harmony between them? Which party is he of? Let it be one or the other: not the chaos of their blind struggle.

He remembers his mother telling him:

MOTHER
Be good, sweetheart. If someone hurts you, forgive him!

JACK
(interrupting)
Why shouldn't I get what I want? They do. What about me?

MOTHER
People hurt each other. It would be easy to be happy if they didn't. You have to overlook it -- give in, sometimes, even if you're in the right.

What is the fate of those who live by love, the golden rule?

Steve is playing in the sprinkler outside, as happy as Jack once was, still on the far bank of a river which Jack himself has already crossed over.

JACK
Are you going to leave us?
(she shakes her head)
Is he?

Jack wonders if he really wishes it. When he comes out of his daydream, his father is still talking.

FATHER
-- If you're good, people take advantage of you. Think of yourself as someone caught behind enemy lines. Work! Fight! I see you wasting your time -- staring out the window -- playing! I make sacrifices for you. You honor those sacrifices by what <u>you</u> do. That's how a family works.

Jack shifts uneasily in his chair.

FATHER (CONT'D)
I'd like to do what I want, too. I dreamed of being a great musician. But how could I make a living for my family? And so I have to go off every day --
(with emotion)
My father lost his job, Ed was off in Vegas, he sent nothing home. I had to quit school and join the Army Air Corps so your grandmother could have something to eat. They shut the lights out on her. We couldn't pay the electricity. She had to take in boarders.

Jack thinks of the love he often feels for his father as he falls asleep at night, listening to him at the piano --

FATHER (CONT'D)
See this? You know why I keep it here? It was the official seal of my own company, the one I formed -- I had the papers -- till I got hepatitis from drinking unpasteurized beer in China. They took it away from me. It's dog eat dog out there. Don't you forget it. Don't let anyone tell you there's anything you can't do! I've protected you as best I can. But I didn't get an education. You will. You'll get through. By God, you will. You can't fool me. I know you like a book!

Jack imagines resting in his father's arms, their differences forgotten. Then the fantastic scene breaks up, and he is back in the living room, sunk in silence.

FATHER (CONT'D)
When you came into this world, you know what I did? I went outside and danced on the lawn. I shot off my pistol. You're my freedom! Every time I see a young guy walk by with a shirt and tie, looking sharp, that's my kid I'm looking at. Don't do like I did, though. Promise me that. I let myself get sidetracked. While you're looking for something to happen, that was it! That was life! You lived it!

FATHER (CONT'D)
(shaking his head)
I let one thing after another drag me backwards. We stuck together, though. When you have nothing, you've still got your honor. Your dignity. You still have each other!

EXT. STREET - STRAY DOG

A stray dog appears; a stranger to the neighborhood. It bumps into things. It seems that it might be blind.

Curious, nonchalant, it trots through the street until Howard's purple-tongued chow materializes out of nowhere to attack it. The boys look on in horror as Shep joins in the fight. His hostility towards a poor, defenseless creature astonishes them. It seems there is no mercy for the weak, the helpless; no quarter given. And the truth is, Jack himself does not mind watching things get worse. It is not until some of the adults roll out a hose and start spraying water on the dogs that he comes to himself and pulls Shep away.

MR. BATES (O.S.)
Somebody must have let it go. Got too old, went blind -- they didn't have the heart to put it to sleep. Probably I should get my shotgun and shoot it.

JACK
Stay here!

Shep will not look him in his eye but twists and turns, eager to get back into the fray

Later the same afternoon, they hear the screech of brakes and a strange, high yelp. Then, far away, a soft wail or moan. Steve breaks into tears.

EXT. VACANT LOT - DUSK

They wade through the weeds of a vacant lot, where the dog has gone to die. From time to time they hear its haunting cry. They cannot find it; only a trail of blood. Wounded, afraid, it keeps dragging itself away from them.

EXT. O'BRIEN HOUSE (BACKYARD)

Jack listens as Steve questions their mother.

STEVE
What happens when you die? Does it hurt? Does it happen to everyone?

MOTHER
Sooner or later.

STEVE
There's nothing you can do about it? Will you die, too?

It seems the grown-ups understand things no better than he does.

MOTHER
Not for a long time.

STEVE
Will I?

RL
You're not that old yet, Mom.

STEVE
Where do you go?

Jack sees his mother with new eyes now. The day might come when she must leave them.

STEVE (O.S.) (CONT'D)
Who put the spikes on the sun?

He remembers when she got her fingers caught in the Mixmaster and cried out to him to jerk the cord from the wall. A quick flash --

EXT. O'BRIEN HOUSE

He remembers, too, a day when they were eating outdoors with the neighbors and suddenly he heard someone shouting. There was a coral snake on the ground. She walked right past it.

He watched how it flowed unhindered over the ground, as if free of friction or restraint, beyond any human power of control, cryptic, a dark enigma with lidless eyes.

MRS. BATES
She walked right past it!

MR. BATES
Get a hoe. Its mate must be around here. You watch: couple of days and it'll turn up.

Mr. Bagley chops the snake in two with a hoe. Mr. Bates stamps on the severed head.

MR. BAGLEY
Nothing you can do if one of them bites you. Against a copperhead you've got a chance. Not these'uns. Once they close their mouth, they can't let go. Even if they wanted to. "Red on yellow, kill a fellow."

EXT. PATIO

The next morning RL turns to his mother:

RL
Where's Dad?

MOTHER
Gone on a trip.

The boys go wild. They crawl around on the floor, they bounce on the beds, they let the screen door slam carelessly behind them. She cannot contain their energy.

JACK
We're going to stay up late.

MOTHER
Oh no, you're not!

STEVE
All night! Don't say no, because you know it makes me angry. Look at me! I mean it!

They run through the sprinkler. Finding a lizard, they chase her into the bathroom with it. Laughing, they ignore her pleas, and when they hear the lock click shut, they slip it in under the door.

MONTAGE - WHILE THEIR FATHER IS AWAY

She shows them flowers, glowing colors and birds that sing, the fruit tree at the edge of the woods, the gardenias, the wings of little creatures beneath a magnifying glass. So many mysteries! She shows them a barn swallow's nest.

MOTHER
They trust us -- not to knock it down.

She gives them a book of natural history. His hands leaf through the pages. There are dinosaurs, frogs and armor-plated fish with names too long to pronounce. The Seven Wonders of the Ancient World.

She shows them the leaf of a tall locust tree and sets it next to a pea vine, demonstrating the family relation there sometimes is between things large and small. For a time all is as it was. The hours go by uncounted.

STEVE
Can I marry you when I grow up?
(she laughs)
Don't tell anyone else.

It makes Jack ill at ease to see his mother cuddling Steve.

JACK
He drank all the milk and didn't leave us any.

Steve bolts out the door and runs around naked in the rain. The thunder and lightning delight him; the water rushing through the gutters, sucking at his ankles, so cool.

MOTHER
You little devil! Come back here!

RL
Mom, I see that thing again.

MOTHER
What thing?

RL
The suckin' goat!

STEVE
It'll suck you down that hole by the fence! It'll get you while you're not looking! It got Woody's dog! Snakes! Hit the lights!

Later, they watch from another room as she dances by herself to some music on the radio.

Jack remembers a dream he once had of his mother lying, like Snow White, in a glass coffin. Her beautiful red cheeks, her hair black as the night. How would he face the world without her? He cannot bear the thought that he might have a separate destiny.

EXT. O'BRIEN HOUSE

Jack brings a jar of ice water and a plate of sandwiches out to O.C., a laborer whom his father has hired to spread fresh loam on the yard.

O.C.
Your mother sent this? Well, she's the nicest lady. She's a good mother and a good woman. I never worked for nobody as considerate.

His salmon-colored palms grip the shovel. He works all day long in the broiling sun. He never complains. There is a joy, it seems, which is compatible with hardship and misfortune.

JACK
Have you seen my fireflies?

He shows O.C. the bottle filled .

O.C.
Those are the souls of dead people. You should let them go. Did I scare you? I didn't mean to.

EXT. HOUSE ROOF

They are up on the roof of a house. They have no business there, and they know it. Jack nods for RL to jump off.

JACK
You have to, if you want to join the club.

RL
Why don't you?

JACK
I already did.

RL
When?

JACK
You weren't around.

They laugh. Later, he dares his brother to stick a coat hanger into a light socket.

JACK (CONT'D)
I turned it off. It won't hurt. I tested it.

RL smiles when nothing happens. But then, as they are roaming around, Jack snatches a stick out of RL's hand. He does not protest.

RL
You can have it.

There is another spirit in his brother than Jack finds in himself. Ashamed, he gives the stick back. Hearing their mother's voice calling them in, they turn home.

EXT. NEIGHBORHOOD - ROBERT

Robert has reappeared in their lives. He leads them on a spree of destruction. He encourages them to steal peaches from McKeever's tree.

ROBERT
They belong to everybody...Nobody tells me what to do... I just do what I want.

Instead of eating the peaches, they throw them away. One after another they break out laughing, until they are all rolling on the ground.

Jack pulls up flowers from the Kimballs' bed. He enjoys the boys' approval. He is ashamed to be guilty of less impudence than the others, but when Robert nods at the windows of the Stickleys' garage, he remembers his mother's stern injunction and shakes his head.

ROBERT (CONT'D)
Why not?

They put a toad on a skyrocket and send it off, then run to see whether it survived its skyward flight. Gone. They cannot find it. And they had felt its life pulse in their hands.

They put a snapping turtle on Shep's ear.

HARRY
It won't let go till sunset.

Shep howls with pain and runs away, glancing over his shoulder with a look of injured trust.

They stamp on snails, burn up wasps. They make a glory of their infamy and lies.

CAYLER
I'm six feet tall! I killed a man!

EXT. COURTHOUSE AND JAIL

Another day, outside the courthouse, Jack looks up and sees a man shouting from a window on the second floor. There are bars on the window; hands are thrust through them.

Nearby, on the sidewalk, he sees a prisoner who has been led down the front steps of the courthouse by two men with guns high on their hips.

The group passes close by. The prisoner's wrists are bound to a restraining belt. He answers the taunting eyes of courthouse loafers with a sneer of proud defiance. Somehow Jack feels close to him; closer, moment, to this stranger than to his own family.

MOTHER
What are you looking at? Come.

One of the policemen stares at him. What does he know, or guess?

Men rise to their feet as Mrs. O'Brien passes by.

EXT. O'BRIEN HOUSE

Mr. O'Brien returns from his travels. The children glance at each other. It is as though a stranger had appeared in their midst. The idyll is over. They must again be the furtive creatures, the cheats, the guilty ones they were before.

He pats them on their heads, a little too hard.

INT. DINING ROOM

Mr. O'Brien tells of his travels -- shows them the towels and washcloths he has carried off from hotels, and money in denominations so large that, were it dollars, they would be rich.

FATHER
Bishop Sheen was down the hall -- two doors away. Very friendly. The French are lovable, but they'll rob you blind. The money's confusing: new francs, old francs; you never know which you've got in your hand. I bought a newspaper for $4. Halfway back to the hotel I realized I'd been robbed. Had a big fight with the lady. Had to call a gendarme. He got her to cough up.
(to Mrs. O'Brien)

FATHER (CONT'D)
I'm confident my deal went through. If not, they can forget it. I'll tell them all to go to hell.

MOTHER
Be careful.

FATHER
I'm not going to let them shove me around.

RL
Can Cayler come over?

FATHER
Your own family isn't good enough for you?

Jack looks at his brother with surprise. He would never dare to invite anyone over. Relatives visit often, but no friend ever comes to their house.

FATHER (CONT'D)
Your mother's from a farm family. Irish. They had people down from Chicago every weekend. That's why they never got the weeds out of their fields. The Norwegians would drive by and laugh!
(she smiles)
You boys don't realize it, but we're skating on thin ice. You live in peace, quiet, in warmth. Look at the food you have. Still on your plate! The abundance! When I was your age, I was chomping tickets at the Clark Theater in Chicago.
(Jack squirms)
Are you in a hurry? After the shows, I cleaned the bathrooms. For years I had one pair of pants. The same green pants! I had to run around in my shorts while my mother washed them. And still, for all that, father was always father to me. Nobody knows what that means these days. Can a child understand?

It seems to Jack that he and his brothers remain alive through their father's sacrifice and bear their lives as an undeserved gift from him. His father has bred in him a deep suspicion of himself, a doubt of his every action; a doubt of others, too, and of their motives. He is becoming anxious about everything; wavering, unable to work out a thought.

There is a loud crash. He let the screen door slam shut.

FATHER (CONT'D)
You can't shut it softly, can you? No, that's too hard for you, I suppose. You don't have the time. That's too much to expect of our worthy son. Horsefeathers! I want you to shut it quietly, fifty times. Not a word of contradiction!

It seems to him there are three worlds, one in which he and his brothers live subject to their father under laws which he has invented for them only and which they can never, without understanding why, ever fully comply with; a second world that their father belongs to; a third where everyone else lives happily, free from orders and having to obey.

FATHER
Come here!
(pinching him)
I love you. If it doesn't always seem that way, it's because I can't pretend like other people do. Kiss me. Kiss your father.

Jack's mind leaps about, bewildered by his father's health and appetite, his swagger, his canniness, his indifference to the burdens he imposes on others; the absence of any consciousness of hypocrisy when he breaks those rules he imposes on others.

FATHER (CONT'D)
What are you thinking? Really thinking? There are things you can't do? Well, there are things I can't do either!

JACK
(hesitantly)
Dad? Why --

FATHER
You're not to call me Dad, but Father. Father, sir. Always honor your father. Every day I go out that door there. I go out and work my tail off for you. Show respect. Don't interrupt!

JACK
You do.

FATHER
I would rather be a beggar on the streets of Cairo than not to have the respect of my family.
(after a pause)
Remember: you're the child.

Jack counts his breaths.

JACK
This is your house. You can throw me out whenever you like.
(quaking all over)
You want to kill me!

FATHER
I, too, didn't have any respect for my father. Not at first.

What do his boys know of life -- the rich man's arrogance, the triumph of the fool?

FATHER (CONT'D)
I saw my mother -- she couldn't read or write -- dependent on a salesman who couldn't make sales and was ashamed to tell her so! Then I learned how things were for him! He died before you boys were born -- in a hit-and-run accident. He lay all night in the street. It was dawn when they found him. Do what you like, though. As far as I'm concerned, you're free. I have no advice to give you. But, if you really want to be free, don't come back to this house in the evening --

His nerves are on fire. His sons seem to be destroying him. He is forced to breathe the air of his own death.

JACK
I hate you.

FATHER
I know. The question is, are you going to do what I tell you to? Do you want to be the only one who's out of step -- and make everyone else unhappy -- just because you're determined to have your own way? Then you'll stay indoors.

FATHER (CONT'D)
You just won't have dinner tonight. None of us will!

Jack looks at his mother. He does not want to bring her any more unhappiness.

JACK
I'm sorry, sir.

FATHER
Thank you for saying "Sir".
(to his wife)
You know what they say in the Navy. If you have a grumbling crew, you have a fit crew. When they don't grumble, something's wrong.

He will learn to deceive. He will use cunning and guile to defend himself and get what he wants.

He will never outwardly defy his father. His defiance will be inward and therefore harder to root out; first it must be detected. He will avenge himself in the cleverest way, without his father's ever knowing it.

INT. BEDROOM

Mr. and Mrs. O'Brien are alone.

FATHER
-- I want to make him strong. I want him to expect great things of himself -- to hold himself with the best. A father gives his child strength. Will!

MOTHER
They're afraid of you.

FATHER
They love me. I'm going to make them do it. I could have had my own company -- been a wealthy man. But, no, we had kids -- I had to take the first job that came along -- Am I a father, or a faucet?

MOTHER
Why don't you let yourself -- love?

FATHER
(surprised)
I do.

MOTHER
-- Let yourself show it.

He looks away. He is afraid of her love for him. It is too good for him. He cannot measure up to it.

It seems to him she does not want him but his soul.

INT. LIVING ROOM

When they next see their father, he pretends nothing is wrong. Does he think they could not hear?

FATHER
What do you want for your birthday?

RL
You.

His father looks at him in surprise -- this child, so unlike the others, gentle as a sage -- then kisses him. RL alone does not stiffen under these effusions of paternal love. Mr. O'Brien feels that he understands the other two, but there is something about RL which strikes a certain awe in him.

Yet he fears for this child, fears he is impractical; a dreamer, dawdler. He rides him about a hundred things; for walking funny, for smiling too long, for hesitating before he speaks.

Does his mother love him because he is the weakest, the tenderest, the most sincere? Sincere people are taken advantage of. Dreamers come to nothing.

EXT. CARPORT

Jack watches his father work on the Studebaker, which he has raised up on a jack. What would happen if he kicked it out?

-- Christmas scenes. Other houses on the block. Each is a home. Is his? The singing, the lights -- ruined by argument, discord --

SERIES OF ANGLES - STRAIGHT RAZOR - ROUGH GREEN SNAKE

His rage is deep as hell. He studies his father's straight razor, with its tortoiseshell handle. Afraid of the darkness rising up within him, he hides it under the sheets in the linen closet. Alone in his bedroom, he prays:

JACK
Please, God, let him die!

A snake slides through the oak tree, swaying as the wind blows, matching the movement of the branches.

EXT. O'BRIEN HOUSE (FRONT YARD)

Mr. O'Brien walks outside. Jack and RL are playing.

FATHER
What are you doing playing out here? Get to work.
(turning to RL)
Did you practice your guitar?

INT. LIVING ROOM - RL WITH GUITAR - JEALOUSY

Jack watches RL practice on a half-scale guitar. He is a true musician, unlike his brothers.

Their mother listens, rapt, as she dandles Steve on her knee. When RL gets frustrated with his mistakes, she consoles him.

MOTHER
It's alright to make mistakes. You have to... Perfection isn't important. Imperfection is beautiful. Even more beautiful.

Mr. O'Brien sits down at the piano and adds an accompaniment to RL's melody. Jealousy of his little brother stirs in Jack again, even as the music brings him back into a presence in which he had ceased to believe.

EXT. NEIGHBORHOOD STREET

He remembers walking with RL earlier in the day. He suggested that they run.

RL
We'll get tired.

JACK
Not me. I never get tired.

RL
You did this morning.

JACK
No I didn't. I was just pretending. You want to call me a liar?

RL
No. I don't want to fight.

JACK
Afraid to?

RL
No, I just don't want to.

JACK
If I was to say you're scared, would you want to call me a liar?

RL
No.

JACK
Then you're scared, aren't you?

RL
I guess so... Why do bees hum?
(Jack shrugs)
Because they don't know the words!

Chastened, Jack mumbles an apology. Love takes the place of envy in his heart. All nature comes alive and answers him approvingly.

Mrs. O'Brien worries about her eldest son. Conflict with his father has caused him to become a glum, inattentive, disobedient child, always intent on escape.

His life has become a tissue of lies and subterfuge. Thefts, lust, savage desires. He is lost in this new darkness, and hardly cares. His is in revolt.

EXT. FRONT YARD

Jack stands with his mother in the front yard.

MOTHER
Look at the tree. It doesn't care how it seems to others. It just is. It puts up with storms, rain, bad weather --

The camera plays over the leaves and branches. One spirit lives in root and trunk, branch and leaf.

MOTHER (O.S.) (CONT'D)
A leaf might think it is separate and alone, but all the leaves are part of the same unfolding. They start from the same seed.

JACK
(interrupting)
He tells me one thing. You tell me another.

Inwardly, she resigns herself to losing her eldest son.

MOTHER
Everything will be all right.

JACK
Then why are you unhappy?

MOTHER
What makes you say that?

He sees the abuse which goodness suffers in this world, the painful consequences of walking in his mother's way. Where does it lead? To a life of sorrow, for all that he can tell.

What is the value of goodness? How shall it stand against bullying force? The golden rule allows others to take advantage of you, to do as they please. It opposes, and can even destroy, your own happiness.

He remembers Mrs. Kimball telling his mother:

MRS. KIMBALL
You're so kind. I wish that I could be like you.

FATHER'S POV ON SONS PLAYING

Mr. O'Brien watches from afar as his sons play with their mother in the front yard. Will he grow mean and despicable? Fall slowly into ruin? Their laughter is like the music of a lost Eden.

INT. LIVING ROOM

Her brother, their Uncle Ray, has come to visit. Mrs. O'Brien confides in him, unaware that Jack is listening from the other room.

MOTHER
A man showed up at the door. A bill collector. A shady character. He's been gambling again.

Much of what she says plays O.S. as her memories are illustrated, starting with scenes from Las Vegas; quick flashes of their past experience.

MOTHER (CONT'D)
He is fascinated with cards. He says they make everyone even. He over-bets his hand. You know, his brother is a keno dealer in Las Vegas. A sweet, gifted man!
(after a pause)
He wants his honor back. His stature. I could get a job. He doesn't want me to, though.

UNCLE RAY
It's hard with three boys.

MOTHER
I wouldn't like to upset them or change their life. I want them to get a good education.
(sighing)
Compared to ours, his family seemed so warm and vital. He was earthy, cheerful. We were happy for a time.
(after a pause)
I tremble to ask him for money. I come to him like a guilty person. He makes a fuss over a bent spoon. He won't do anything to change. I dread him coming into the room.

UNCLE RAY
Tell him. Either he learns to behave like everyone else, or... He doesn't know what love is, anyway.

MOTHER
why do you say that?

UNCLE RAY
Leave.

Jack looks up, shocked. Would she? Has he, with his complaints about his father, contributed to such a desire? He fears that he might cause the breakup of his family.

UNCLE RAY (CONT'D)
Take the boys with you. Your patience is wonderful. But what if it's killing you?

MOTHER
I can't trade their happiness for mine. It would haunt me... I've thought about it.

MOTHER (CONT'D)
I still know shorthand. When I worked at Bendix before we got married, I could type a hundred words a minute. I don't know what I could do now. With three children... Don't remind me that I ever talked this way. You're my only friend. The others, they're very nice, but I can't really talk with them. It's a small town.

UNCLE RAY
You can't let it keep you from living.

MOTHER
He hasn't filed an income tax return in three years! I'm afraid he'll lose his job. He drives the men under him too hard. Nobody likes him. He's not a selfish or a cold man. But he turns people against him. He offends them -- almost on purpose. He loves me as much as he can. What a day it was when I first saw his real nature. But he's a good provider. He works hard. There are two people in him.

She is loathe to reveal to anyone, even her brother, how unhappy she is, or to betray her husband's confidence.

UNCLE RAY
Do you love him still?
(she nods)
Bob could help you.

MOTHER
He'll never pay that back. He resents it when I ask. So does Ellen. I wish I'd finished college. I dreamt of studying medicine.

They laugh. Flashes of her carefree youth: a ride in a biplane, spinning at a dance.

MOTHER (CONT'D)
We all had dreams. I want the kids to get through college. It makes me happy seeing you.

She has never quite found a stream of fellowship in Waco.

LATER

The boys hear their father arguing with their uncle.

UNCLE RAY (O.S.)
You've worn her out -- made a slave of her -- crushed her!

FATHER (O.S.)
You come and go. I've put up with it for years. Get out! Get a job!

THEN

MOTHER (O.S.)
You humiliated him.

FATHER (O.S.)
It will do him good. Everyone has to do his part. Your brothers come to spend three days, they end up staying for six months.

She watches as her brother goes off.

EXT. O'BRIEN HOUSE - LAWN - OAK TREE - NIGHT

Only the porch light is burning. Jack has slipped out of the house and is picking weeds. The night is so vast: he begins to weep. He puts his face in his hands. He bows to the oak tree.

His mother appears. He turns around, startled. She is lovely in her flowing nightgown.

MOTHER
What are you doing?

JACK
Picking weeds.

MOTHER
Now? At night? Why?

JACK
So you'll stop fighting.

Will she leave? He has begun to guess the depths of her unhappiness. Taking him by the hand, she leads him back to the house.

JACK (CONT'D)
Momma -- listen -- I'll make you proud. Happy. Here at home. In school. I won't stop until I do!

He will take her tears away. She shakes her head. That is not what she wants.

MOTHER
But I want you to be happy. I don't want you to feel you have to do anything for me.

His efforts to make her proud have so far had the ironic consequence of causing her endless worry.

JACK
That's not enough. I can do more.

MOTHER
Be good to your brothers.

JACK
I will. I swear it. But -- will you help me?

MOTHER
Yes.

He thinks of his father.

JACK
I hate him. I wish he were dead!

He quakes all over. It seems he has all hell in his heart.

JACK (CONT'D)
I'll kill him if you want!

MOTHER
Your father! I don't want you to hate him. I want you to love him.

JACK
Do you?
(she nods)
How?

She does not answer right away. He throws himself against a closed door.

JACK (CONT'D)
Why? Why? Why did Johnny Baden push me down? Why did Uncle Ed not come back? You told me it would be all right! Why does he hurt us? Is it me? Something about me?

MOTHER
There's nothing bad about you. Forgive him.

JACK
Have you?

MOTHER
Think of the good things he does for us. For others —

EXT. POOL (BARTON SPRINGS) - QUICK ANGLES (MEMORY)

Milton Stone, a boy Jack's age, is swimming an underwater race at a public pool when, suddenly, he turns over on his back and floats up to the surface, his arms thrown wide. The other boys think he is kidding and splash him with water until they see his lips are blue. Panic spreads. Many shrink away, but Mr. O'Brien comes forward to take command of the situation. He calls for an ambulance. He breathes into Milton's mouth. The boys stand in the shallows, hold hands and say the Lord's prayer. Jack looks left and right, proud of his father, who gazes at Mrs. Stone with a heartfelt sympathy.

EXT. PORCH - RESUMING THE FOREGOING SCENE - NIGHT

Jack marvels at his mother. She seems never to want anything. She does not vary, like their father; is constant in temper.

JACK
We're not a happy family, are we? We were before. Will our family be like Howard's?
(she kisses him)
Now, at school, when I see good kids, I want to be bad.

She is silent for a moment.

MOTHER
I don't know all things. I haven't been everything a mother should be. But a parent learns. She has to grow up, too.

MOTHER (CONT'D)
There are a lot of hard things in this world. I wish I could keep them all away from you.

JACK
Have I done anything wrong today?

MOTHER
No. Things may seem bad now, but they won't always be this way. We're on our way towards something good. We'll go away this summer and rent a cabin by the lake. Dad will tell you about the places he's been. And I'll tell you about the day when I was a girl and a rhinoceros escaped from the fair.

A rhinoceros rambles through an Illinois corn field.

MOTHER (CONT'D)
We'll build a fire and stay up late. We'll watch the stars, and sing --

INT. LIVING ROOM

Mr. O'Brien is baffled by the opposition which he creates for himself. Home should be a haven from the world's contempt. The ingratitude of children can drive a man to madness.

He keeps the family's life from being either comfortable or tedious. They live in a continual state of uncertainty. In his better moods he is their comic. He plays the piano like Harpo Marx in "A Night at the Opera." He lights a cork, blows it out and applies the dark ash to his upper lip to create a dandy's moustache. He puts on airs and acts out dramas. He sits at the piano and makes it all up as he goes along, like a little opera.

Mrs. O'Brien laughs as he leaps over the sofa, fencing now. He is like a child himself, with sudden spasms of craving for physical affection -- for proofs of a sentimental love.

Jack remembers other times when he has felt close to his father. How precious, how wonderful those hours were! Lying on the car seat and listening to him sing to himself at the steering wheel as they went on vacation --

FATHER
Come on! 345 x 78. <u>Visualize</u> it. Try again. In your mind. You're not trying. Pay attention. Trust me. I'm doing this to help you.

FATHER (CONT'D)
What is it? I want you to stand there till you tell me.

RL stands in place until the sun goes down. Steve turns to his father.

STEVE
Who are you?

Mr. O'Brien looks at him, surprised.

EXT. KIMBALLS' HOUSE - WIND CHIMES

Jack notes how Mrs. Kimball's thin cotton dress clings to her in the heat. She drinks from a hose. The water flows over her bare feet.

MRS. KIMBALL
You want a drink?

He shakes his head. She is a kind, lovely woman; shy.

Later, he paces back and forth outside the Kimball house, until he sees her through the open drapes.

Later still, as night is falling, he walks past the Bates',, eager to see more. There is an odd gray flicker on the ceiling in the living room. TV has entered the neighborhood, though no one thinks much of it and only the Bates have a set.

EXT. WELLS' HOUSE

Howard has a look of dread on his face. Jack frowns.

HOWARD
Dad's come back.

Jack is transported to the scene in Howard's recounting of it.

MR. WELLS (O.S.)
What am I doing? Minding my binness. Go cut a switch.

Howard cuts a switch off a willow tree. Mrs. Wells closes herself up inside her bedroom.

Howard watches his father come towards him; no, not a father but a beast of wrath and sensuous intoxication. As the blows fall, the boy's cries excite him to greater cruelty.

MR. WELLS (CONT'D)
(chewing gum)
Lick the floor with your tongue.
Pay! Somebody's going to pay!

He takes Howard outside and shoves him down into the storm cellar, shuts the door and sets the chow to guard it. In the darkness below, Howard wails and weeps and pounds his face with his fists. Daddy, Daddy! Please, Daddy! He clenches his fists and beats his chest and begs heaven to protect him. It goes on until he can scream no more but gasps for breath.

HOWARD
Dear God! Help us! Please!

NEXT DAY

The next day Jack listens as RL tells their mother:

RL
We learned in school the sun is going to die. The earth, too. Is it true?

MOTHER
Maybe -- but such a long time from now it doesn't matter.

INT. SCHOOL ROOM - JACK

Math, geography; boundaries and rules. Day by day, the adult world closes itself about him.

He gazes at Marsha. So this is love. Where might it lead you? It is like returning to your original state -- like being healed.

EXT. CITY - A LATE AFTERNOON IN MAY

The boys are playing outside when the wind comes up. In the south the sky has turned black.

The branches of the oak tree rise and fall. The wind grows stronger. Shep looks up, puzzled. A newspaper flies through the street. The boys drift inside. The windows move as if they were breathing. The radio announces an approaching storm.

TORNADO - STOCK (35MM) - DUSK, NIGHT

A tornado bears down on the town. There is lightning, then hail; big hailstones that bounce off the street. The wind makes a roar like a train.

Lawn furniture, toys and garbage cans are swept along the street. The front door rattles until it seems the glass might break. The laundry line flies out like a flag.

A tree has fallen in the middle of the street, illuminated by the headlights of a swerving car. Downed power lines spew showers of sparks. Everyone is solemn and still. It seems some elemental violence has come forth to threaten good and wicked alike; a great power ready at any time to sweep down on men with an unbridled cruelty, tearing the life and hope out of them, destroying the labor of their years.

The hailstones split the windshield of a car, smash leaves and branches off the trees. The doors fly open. Curtains are sucked out the window. There is a chaos of thunder and lightning. At length the power goes out. Their mother appears with a candle and leads them away from the windows. The flame wavers, threatens to go out.

The radio narrates the rest: how an electrician working on the roof of a building downtown fell five stories when it collapsed and walked away, how all went black as power lines popped like strings. The National Guard has been called out, the horn of a flattened truck is still blowing, etc.

EXT. NEIGHBORHOOD - EVIDENCE OF TORNADO'S PASSAGE

The next day the children are out in the streets with the grown-ups, noting signs of the tornado's passage: the clothes of strangers hanging from the branches of a tree, a chair, a tricycle too: a catfish sucked up from the lake and dropped on the lawn; a tree struck by lightning, split down the middle, stripped of its leaves and bark.

A house has been tossed into a field down the road, its intimate contents scattered through the street. A car lies demolished while next to it another has gone untouched. A vase stands undisturbed in a demolished room. Strangers stare at a family which has lost its home. The full wrath of the skies has descended on them alone.

RL
How does it pick?

Uprooted trees lie scattered like bowling pins. It is as if the fabric of reality had been torn away, and beyond it they were given to gaze into some abyss of meaninglessness, futility and terror.

MR. BATES
McKeever died.

MR. KIMBALL
He never did nothing wrong.

A neighbor has died, a man they rarely saw. Jack has no reaction to this news -- only the fear that she might die. Where would they be then? Word comes that a hundred and fourteen others have shared Mr. McKeever's fate.

That night a figure of death appears to Jack in a dream. She leads him into an abandoned house. She gives Mr. McKeever a cup to drink.

JACK'S POV ON HIS MOTHER

Jack observes his mother, smiling as she helps RL with his science project, a model of the solar system. It seems that in some way she has betrayed him. He feels angry at her for being so vulnerable, so easily imposed upon. When she asks him to help her carry in the groceries, he pretends not to have heard and walks away.

LATER - HIS BROTHER'S HAND

As Jack listens to RL practice the guitar, he thinks of his brother's hand, how it played with the wind outside the window of the moving car -- how it reached out to touch the leaves of the tree in the front yard, the bark -- the water running from the hose and spreading across the smooth concrete of the driveway --

INT. O'BRIEN HOUSE

His mother speaks in a hushed voice into the phone.

MOTHER
Now he's sold our stocks, the few we have--Jack is acting up at school, getting into trouble --

INT. SCHOOL ROOM

Jack competes with a boy named Billy for the title of class clown. While Mr. Reese is giving dictation, he stands up and asks:

JACK
How do you spell "the"?

Everyone laughs. He did not ask it as a joke, however. He genuinely forgot. Marsha looks away. This sort of thing is not likely to win her favor. She does not return his greeting in the hall.

EXT. STICKLEYS' HOUSE

Jack stands with Robert and some of the other neighborhood boys near the Stickleys' garage.

ROBERT
Where are you going?

He can tell Jack is afraid of him.

JACK
We're not supposed to bother them.

ROBERT
Who says? They don't use it, anyway.

They look at each other a moment, then Jack picks up a rock. The first one misses, the second does not. They break out in laughter at the sound of the shattering glass.

EXT. LAUNDRY LINE - WIND CHIMES, MARTIN HOUSE

Jack walks through the clothes fluttering indiscreetly on the Kimballs' laundry line. Purple martins flit about their happy home.

EXT. KIMBALLS' HOUSE - DAWN OF HIS MORAL AWARENESS

Jack is playing with the other boys when, out of the corner of his eye, he sees Mrs. Kimball driving away. He turns back to their games, distracted now. He knows he must not go into the house. But the wish keeps interposing itself.

The garage is still and cool . There are a few wasps stirring in the corner. He tests the door. Once again, it is open. In the distance he hears the cries of his playmates.

He hesitates. This might be the first time he has ever made a simple choice between good and evil, right and wrong.

Who would be hurt by his disobedience? Yet this is the only thing his mother has ever so plainly and explicitly forbidden. His heart pounds in his throat. He turns away, but the wind chimes seem to draw his attention back to the door.

INT. KIMBALLS' HOUSE

Crossing the threshold, he feels a sort of vertigo, a pride in his cleverness, a wild reckless joy in abandoning himself to the forbidden.

He wanders through the house examining things, taking care to put them back in their places. He avoids the eyes of the portraits on the wall. He passes by the silver and china. He hesitates before the stairs that lead towards the bedroom. Dare he up?

What do the adults know that he does not? He longs to leave his childhood behind.

Inside the master bedroom all stands in impeccable order.

He looks through Mrs. Kimball's cosmetics, then discovers the chest of drawers where she keeps her clothes. His breath grows quick and shallow.

He opens a drawer. He gazes at the folded garments. He takes out a nightgown.

Suddenly, a noise. He looks up, starts to leave, then sees to his surprise that he has left the drawer open. He closes it quietly.

With the craft of a burglar, he does not go back the way he came but unlatches a screen and slips out a window at the back of the house, into the holly bushes with their sharp-tipped leaves.

EXT. KIMBALLS' HOUSE -

Outside, he stands alone, breathless. Has anyone seen him? He glances at the gazing ball on its stand in the backyard.

Uncertain what to do with the nightgown, he hides it under a board at the edge of the woods. His eyes dart left and right. No normal boy would do this. Of that he is sure. He should have stayed out of the house. He chose not to. He knows.

Nature, which once sang around him, is silent now. And yet he feels a subtle alteration in himself; a freedom, with new powers of reason and understanding. So this is how they see the world!

With the opening of his eyes, new hopes awaken, the promise of new joys, their taste so sweet in his anticipation of them that all he has known before seems stale and flat.

EXT. O'BRIEN HOUSE

He looks up. It is his mother, calling him. Her voice floats on the air, barely perceptible, through the hedges and back yards. He pretends not to hear.

MOTHER (O.S.)
Where are you?

She walks through the yard in the cool of the evening, repeating the question. Where are you?

He feels conscious of himself, inwardly naked.

He trudges heavily back toward his home. It does not seem the place he knew before. He hears something like the breath, or footsteps, of someone coming after him, the voice of a stranger far away --

NEW ANGLE - MOTHER'S POVS - LETTING GO OF HAND

She gazes at him. Something is wrong. His face is fallen. Love is not in it.

He looks at her. Does she know? How can he tell her all that is in his heart? He has broken faith with her.

MOTHER
Where have you been?

JACK
Out in the woods. With Cayler.

Once he starts, he cannot stop.

JACK (CONT'D)
We found some bottles. We broke them. Brown bottles.

MOTHER
What is it, Sweetheart?

He does not answer. A cloud has come over his life. A burglar, a liar, a thief, in bondage to strange forces, the good world forever in his past. She would forgive, but he dares not ask. He lets go of her hand.

The tone and visual style of the picture have grown harder, more realistic, disenchanted. There are no hints or calls from the transcendent world he knew in his play. No more.

What ship has carried him off? To what far land?

The change is indicated to him from all quarters: the rotting peaches on the tree, the grackles gabbing with each other in their roost, the locked gate, a threatening dog, the porch light, the wind blowing uselessly this way and that.

The stars and the trees have disappeared. They are no more to him than the wallpaper in his room. He will never be a child again.

EXT. OAK TREE

When he goes outside, the oak tree does not speak with him as before. His own dog Shep looks at him as though he was a stranger. The little stream of his disobedience has grown into a river and overspread the earth.

INT. SCHOOL ROOM

When Jack next speaks with his teacher, he is very pleasant and respectful, if thoroughly insincere. Mr. Reese is deceived by the change in his behavior.

MR. REESE
Good job.

JACK
Thank you.

And so he learns to make his way in the world. He has begun to be aware of how he appears to others and of what they think of him. That he can shape their impressions of him -- act friendly and compliant, then go right on doing what he pleases, leaving them none the wiser.

He will show a petty talent and success in school but alas!, as a substitute for the real worth that his mother wishes him to have.

INT. LIVING ROOM

Jack sees RL at work on a watercolor.

JACK
What's that?

RL
I'm painting it for mother. For her birthday.

JACK
I got her a paperweight.

Later, he looks at his paperweight. It is not as personal or imaginative a gift as RL's, though it cost more. Will she understand?

She thanks Jack for his gift, but seems to appreciate RL's more.

MOTHER
How lovely!

The next day, Jack pours water over RL's work, causing the colors to run. Later, when she asks him not to slam the screen door, he replies:

JACK
I'm not going to do anything you say.

MOTHER
We'll see!

JACK
I'm going to do what I want.
(after a pause)
What do you know? You let him run all over you.

He sees that his words have stung her. He looks up at her: the one who knows him through and through and miraculously still loves him.

JACK (CONT'D)
What's happening to me? I was so happy before.

Why does he do those very things which injure his mother's happiness and cause her anxiety? He vowed to make her happy, to redeem her sorrow. Now he is the chief cause of it! Will his way lead farther and farther down, into darkness and night? Already he leads the life of a spy.

Mrs. O'Brien sees that she has lost him. His soul has drifted away. He has grown hard and closed. He has turned from her way of doing things to his father's, though he admires his father's way less. How soon before the other boys follow?

INT. LIVING ROOM

His mother and father argue. She tries to keep her voice down.

MOTHER
They're just kids. You can't expect them to act like adults.

FATHER
Don't they see all I'm doing for them?

MOTHER
What are you afraid of? They want to love you. Why don't you go out and play catch with them? Praise them when they do well.

FATHER
I don't want them to get lazy.

MOTHER
You turn people against you. You're always saying foolish things about the men above you. You offend them -- almost on purpose.

FATHER
They need me. More than I need them.

MOTHER
Why don't you tell me the truth?
(after a silence)
Why do you always have to pretend?

FATHER
Pretend?

EXT. A NEIGHBOR'S HOUSE - DUSK

Jack eavesdrops at doors. He spies on a neighborhood woman from the darkness outside her house. He holds a sealed letter up against the light. He sees a pin-up on a gas station wall. Something is pulling him away from what is dearest to him.

When RL calls him to join in their childish games, he shakes his head. He no longer cares to follow them into the woods.

EXT. OAK TREE, FRONT YARD

RL whispers to Jack as he fingers the bark of the oak tree in the front yard.

RL
I know we're unhappy now -- but if we touch this tree -- listen, it will tell us!

JACK
What?

RL
Caleecha Makeecha! The words!

JACK
What words?

RL
The ones that will destroy all the evil in people's hearts and bring them everything good. They'll be healthy. None sick! And they'll never fight again. Listen!

Caleecha Makeecha! He whispers the words to waken the tree, to persuade it to unfold its secret.

JACK
I don't believe in that stuff any more.

EXT. BATES' HOUSE

The boys are playing on a slide at the Bates' house. Rusty Wells has climbed to the top, imagining that he too would like to go down, only to find that he is afraid.

CAYLER
Everybody else has!

Jack sneaks up the ladder and gives the trembling child a push. Rusty falls to the ground with a thud. He looks up at Jack, whom he trusted as a friend and protector, then bursts into tears and runs off. Howard does not protest but merely bows his head and leads Rusty home, walking a few paces in front of him.

JACK
You okay?

Jack is astonished. It is as though a devil had entered him.

JACK (CONT'D)
He was getting in my way.

There are more and more things his mother and father do not know about him and could not guess; things that he is guilty of far worse than any they have punished him for.

This darkness in himself, it lies in others too. He remembers standing in the dusk, listening to Howard cry. His father had returned home and was beating him with a belt. Why should the tornado take better men and leave this beast to roam?

Mrs. O'Brien has heard what Jack did to Rusty.

JACK (CONT'D)
Why do I do these things? You're going to hate me. I want to be like I was before. I want to be little again.

She strokes his back, consoling him.

JACK (CONT'D)
I want to be someone else. I always do stupid things. Sometimes I want to run away. I'm afraid I'm going to turn into a killer. Then I'll have to kill myself. I mess up. I don't know why. I can make my hand write a word on a piece of paper. But when I want to act right, I can't do it. You don't love me anymore, Momma. You don't come and give me hugs like you used to. How can I be good? Why's it so hard?

She looks at him and smiles. He hears a train whistle far away.

JACK (CONT'D)
Starting tomorrow I'm going to change. Mr. Reese is going to give a silver dollar to the one who reads the most books. I want you to be hard with me -- to shout at me. I'm going to be a new kid tomorrow.

INT. O'BRIEN HOUSE- RADIO SHOWS O.S.

He turns from the outdoors to occupy his days with the radio, the Sears catalogue and other things of the world.

INT. BATHROOM

Earlier, he was not embarrassed to go naked in his mother's presence. Now when she comes upon him getting out of the shower, he quickly shuts the door.

INT. BOYS' ROOM

One night, for no reason, RL starts repeating his name. Jack pinches him on the arm, to get him to stop.

RL
Brother.

JACK
When I hit you, you don't hit back. Why?

His brother is more genial. Why would he not be preferred?

Then the idea sets in. He will punish his mother through her favorite. He will make himself deliberately and knowingly unlovable. He will flaunt his worthlessness as a protest.

Now he is alone -- alone with his frailty, with the struggle of light and darkness in his soul. A tide is carrying him away from those whom he should love, whose love towards him has not changed in the least.

EXT. SCHOOL GROUNDS

A student rings the bell for class.

INT. MR. REESE'S OFFICE

Jack's mother has been called in for a conference.

MR. REESE
He interrupts the class. He doesn't listen to instructions. He's afraid to finish his painting, or write a sentence -- afraid it might be wrong. He copied his report out of the World Book.

MOTHER
He cheated?

Later, she sees him hit himself in the face in frustration. She decides it is time to take steps.

INT. LIVING ROOM

Jack overhears his parents discussing his future.

MOTHER (O.S.)
Maybe we should send him away to school.

FATHER (O.S.)
We don't have the money... The other boys can't go. It wouldn't be fair.

MOTHER (O.S.)
I can work. I could get a job.

FATHER (O.S.)
People would wonder what was wrong... We'd lose face.

EXT. FIELD

Jack leads his brother out into the field beyond the house.

JACK
I've got something to show you.

RL wants to go back. Something about his manner is odd.

JACK (CONT'D)
We can shoot wasps.

Jack has brought his BB gun. He urges his brother to put his finger over the tip.

JACK (CONT'D)
Do it. Like this. I won't shoot. Don't you trust me?

RL
You won't do anything?

RL smiles. He puts his finger over the muzzle. Jack hesitates. Then he pulls the trigger.

RL howls in pain and consternation, looks at his brother, then runs back to the house.

Jack is sick at heart. It could not have been he who acted in this way. Something acted on him. But no, he did it, though a strange he; not the real he.

A new pain enters his soul, one that his mother's touch cannot take away.

INT. O'BRIEN HOUSE - LATER

RL does not look at him. Never again will he get back to that garden where their spirits mingled as one. He has trampled on all that is dear.

JACK
I got told on.

Even Steve is wary of him.

TIGHT ON HIS MOTHER

JACK
It was an accident.

MOTHER
No, it wasn't. What got into you?

He wants to confess -- all but those sins he feels ashamed of.

JACK
You always loved him more.

She will not be put off.

MOTHER
If you've done your brother wrong, you can set it right. Be kind to him. Do something. Go.

INT. BOYS' ROOM

Jack gives RL the thunder egg he treasured. RL is delighted. He bounces on the bed.

EXT. FRONT YARD

Jack walks out across the front yard and stands under the oak tree. He is lost to what he was, but he has found something new.

INT. LIVING ROOM

Some days later, Jack joins his parents in the living room.

FATHER
Come in here. We want to speak with you. Sit down.
(he does)
We never finished college, neither I nor your mother. We want you to have the best education. So we've decided -- we're sending you off to school.

He turns accusingly to his mother. She looks away. She does not wish it. But he has been fighting so much with his father, it might be the only way to save him from destruction.

FATHER (CONT'D)
...We'll still see you on vacation. It's just a hundred miles away, you know. A good school. I've spoken with the people there. They know what a good boy you are. But if we're going to do this, then you will work. Your brothers --

Jack leaps up and rushes out of the house.

EXT. YARD AND WOODS

His chest heaves with violent emotions. The trees, the familiar houses offer no consolation now.

EXT. NEW HOUSE GOING UP

RL leads Jack to a new house that is just going up at the end of the block. They slip like ghosts among the sweet-smelling studs, and wander through the rooms looking for slugs by the electrical boxes. RL looks at him and smiles.

Robert appears. A moment later RL is crying.

RL
He stole my slugs.

Jack gives him the slugs that he himself has found. Then --

EXT. ROBERT'S HOUSE

He marches over to Robert's house and punches him in the nose, knocking him to the ground.

LATER

His mother speaks with him alone.

MOTHER
I think this will be for the best. You've been having so much trouble with your father -- I know you love him -- and with your classmates at school. I -- we -- think it might be better than the school here -- better for you, I mean. We haven't been good parents, or you wouldn't be under all this tension. We should have set you a better example. I will miss you very much.

Dimly he senses that she does not want this separation -- that she is doing something that is very hard for her.

She looks at him. The child she expects to have the most trouble with. At last she must give him into the world's hands!

EXT. CARPORT

One afternoon Mr. O'Brien returns home early. He asks no questions of the boys. He does not demand to know if they have practiced the piano or weeded the beds. His eyes do not meet theirs. It is the middle of a weekday. It is strange to the boys that he is home at all.

FATHER
Go play for a while, will you? I want to speak to your mother alone.

Inwardly, he seems to stagger.

INT. LIVING ROOM

He sits down in a corner and gazes out the window. His life now seems to him a folly. The world a fraud. But he might still have them -- his family -- whom he took for granted.

Jack hears a muffled cry. At first it seems they might be having another fight. But this is a new, unfamiliar sound; a moan. Jack stands in the hall, listens.

FATHER (O.S.)
They're closing the plant. I can either strike out on my own, or stay with the company and take whatever job they offer me. They expect me to beg.

MOTHER (O.S.)
I'm sorry.

FATHER (O.S.)
We have to think of the kids. Don't tell them what happened. I don't want them to worry.

Moved at the sight of his shame and dismay, she touches his cheek, consoling him. Jack watches through a crack in the door. Mr. O'Brien trembles with a sense of wonder and discovery.

FATHER (CONT'D)
I'm not the man I thought I was. I've driven my sons away from me. I thought I was making them -- tough -- so they could live in the world -- so they could get ahead -- go farther. I treated them with malice.

MOTHER
You didn't know what you were doing.

FATHER
I did. I knew while I was doing it. It was a rational malice. I thought I could never harm anyone I loved! I worked my fingers to the bone. Six, seven days a week. I tithed at church. I made the others think I was something I'm not. And you, what have I done to you, who've loved me through it all: someone lower than a worm.

MOTHER
No.

FATHER
They gave me a choice: no job, or a job nobody wants. Where did I go wrong? But this could be an exciting new opportunity for us. I mean, I'm not really being fired, just -- reassigned. I've gone about as far as I can go here. It might be time to move on.

Jack sees RL has come up behind him in the hall.

FATHER (CONT'D)
It was my fault. I believed in the company! What I should have done was take my life into my own hands. Now I'm low. In the mud. The strange thing is -- I feel free!
(taking her hands)
Thank you for loving me!

NEW ANGLE

Jack looks at his mother and father. He waits for an explanation. He never before has seen him shaken and bewildered.

RL
What is it?

FATHER
I lost my job. They want to -- transfer me. They don't understand the business. There are ups and downs. Everyone knows that --

Jack's heart opens towards him.

FATHER (CONT'D)
Do you understand? You can't. You will! Forgive me. I've behaved so badly -- I've not only lost the light myself, but the power to give it to you -- my children. I've given you my darkness instead. And it will take you years to find your way out of it. I wanted to be strong! A man you could love --

He looks at them. He sees how much he needs them, more than the success he craved, more than wealth or prestige.

FATHER (CONT'D)
Can you love me?

JACK
(nods)
I'm as bad as you are.
(after a pause)
I'm more like you than her.

FATHER
No you're not. I can make up for it. All those wasted years -- it will be like they never were! The waste!
(after a pause)
Just work hard. You don't need to be rich. By God, we've still got some fight in us yet, boy! We're not dead yet. Not half dead!

Even in such a moment his father cannot resist a theatrical flourish.

FATHER (CONT'D)
Now we'll only be able to send one of you away to school. You have to get through. The way your grandfather did, when he came to this country.

JACK
I'll work hard, I promise. I'll make you proud. I see all you do. I'm proud of you, Dad.

FATHER
Don't say that -- You boys are all that I've done in life. Otherwise I drew a zilch.
(after a pause)
You're all I have -- all I want to have.

He lays his hands on top of Jack's head.

FATHER (CONT'D)
Father, I give him my blessing. There's so much I can't do, and haven't done. I give you my son! Bless and keep him. Bless all the children.
(to Jack)
Know that, much as I love you, there's one who loves you even more -- who'll always guard and protect you--

JACK
It's you I want.

Jack throws himself into his father's arms. Light spreads through his soul, the spirit which moved over the chaos; the first light of creation.

JACK (CONT'D)
Forgive me.

FATHER
Don't say that! How could I -- not forgive anyone?

He hugs his father close. He has learned to love and be loved. In forgiving, he receives forgiveness too.

Forgiveness has given him the key to reality. He sees it now: love is the answer to evil and sorrow. He will love every leaf and every stone, every ray of light!

This is the way to the lost kingdom. This is what life will be: drawing closer and closer to the eternal.

ALONE WITH RL

Jack gives RL his knife, his compass. RL smiles.

EXT. O'BRIEN HOUSE

Jack goes out under the tree in the front yard. He sees with the eyes of his soul. Even sorrow has brought him good.

SCENES HIS SPIRIT SEES - CRANE AND AERIAL SHOTS

Fields, forests, tall mountains: the world is restored to its original beauty. His soul has emerged from childhood. He soars like a god.

His has been a journey into light, into love; out of error into truth, from grief to consolation, out of death to the shores of a new, unending life.

The eternal is not one thing, and he another. He grows from it like a tree from the earth.

EXT. PATIO

Jack finds himself alone with his mother.

MOTHER
I love you, honey. I'm proud of you. From time to time you might go wrong. Don't blame yourself. You have to go wrong in order to grow.

Tears sting his eyes. May he be worthy of her pride!

MOTHER (CONT'D)
We're a family still. Our troubles -- can bring us closer. Sometimes we can't stay where we were. We have to move on. I know you don't want to leave this place behind but something good lies ahead of you. Something beyond your dreams.

THE FAMILY TOGETHER - LATER

The family. Together. That is enough.

Mrs. Stickley comes out of her house. It is the first time Jack has ever laid eyes on her. She is an old woman. She looks at him, smiles, says nothing.

EXT. FRONT DOOR - DOORBELL

The doorbell rings. Mrs. O'Brien finds their widowed neighbor, Mrs. McKeever, on the front step.

MRS. MCKEEVER
I heard you all might be leaving. I just wanted to pay you back -- well, a start -- $50 --

MOTHER
Pay us back for what?

MRS. MC KEEVER
(embarrassed)
I thought you knew. Well, I hope I haven't done anything wrong. When my husband died in the tornado, your husband came over and gave us $1000 so we could keep up the house payments. You're not upset?

MOTHER
Not at all.

On the contrary, her neighbor has rekindled Mrs. O'Brien's love for her husband. She had assumed their stocks were sold to satisfy his gar ' 'ng debts.

INT. O'BRIEN HOUSE - A MONTH LATER

They are packing up the house, preparing to leave. Jack walks through the empty rooms. Already it seems as if they lived here in some time long past.

FATHER AND MOTHER

Mr. O'Brien sees his wife saying goodbye to her gardenias. She runs her hand over the bright, waxy leaves.

FATHER
They won't grow in the north.

She nods, comes to his side, smiles.

FATHER (CONT'D)
Let's not fight or blame each other. Can we start again? I'm going to make you happy.

EXT. OAK TREE

Jack watches as RL sets an offering at the base of the oak tree: some rocks, a dead minnow, a coin and a playing card.

EXT. NEIGHBORHOOD

Jack casts a last, lingering look at the neighbors' houses. He will never live here again. This part of his life is over. But now that music comes back which he once heard in the woods, then ceased to hear; an answering voice.

JACK'S POVS ON FATHER

Mr. O'Brien is back at his old ways, tormenting them with scoldings and arbitrary orders. Has he forgotten his great revelation? Jack's nerves are taut. It seems forgiveness must be an ongoing business.

FATHER
Pick it up by the handle.

JACK
I see.

FATHER
We'll leave at sunrise.

EXT. O'BRIEN HOUSE

It is early morning. They said their farewells to the neighbors the night before. The station wagon is loaded up. The movers have already left.

RL does a rain dance. Steve is in the car. The gate stands open that leads out to the woods.

Jack comes up beside RL and takes his hand. Bending forward, he kisses his brother on the cheek.

UP ANGLE ON MOTHER - MUSIC - A FANFARE

Mrs. O'Brien sees this, smiles. She takes Jack by the hand, and together they go off, the world before them now.

POVS FROM MOVING CAR

They are pulling away when Shep appears. They almost forgot him. He wags his tail as he jumps in the car.

The streets of Waco recede behind them.

EXT. HIGHWAY - GULLIED FIELDS - ROAD AHEAD - MUSIC

A rainbow spreads above the horizon as they set out toward the east, onto the cold plain of the world.

They pass a highway crew: men toiling by the sweat of their brows. Civilization appears; tall buildings; public works.

Jack gazes at the road ahead; hopeful, expectant.

PART THREE

EXT. CITY - JACK (ADULT) - THE FUTURE

Jack, an adult now, wakes up from his reverie. His soul has come to life. He sees the order of things, the sanity of the creative scheme; a moral purpose underlying all.

Now, before his eyes, the future unfolds.

THE WORLD IN RUINS - THE GREAT TRIBULATION

Scenes from the Congo, from Bangladesh, Iraq and Chad. Children stranded by a flood; their mute, inquiring eyes. Dry, abandoned wells. Riots, fires. Grief and dread have seized the earth.

EXT. NEW EARTH - THE FAMILY OF MAN

The music shifts to a major key. The C minor of the chaos section is resolved into a triumphant E flat major as, after the great catastrophe, a new earth appears; a new land of the spirit.

Evil is overcome, wrong is set right. Men lay down their arms. Manacles are undone. Bolts and locks fly open. Black embraces white, Muslim Jew. Man recovers his lost inheritance. The soul is reconciled with nature.

Women from Guatemala, India, Kenya, Greenland: they smile at their children. Scenes of peace and harmony: from the Dordogne, from Bhutan and Switzerland, and other happy lands where the earth is still a garden.

THE END OF THE EARTH (CGI) - BLACK SKY - MUSIC

The last days of the earth. Man has long since left its surface to seek asylum on worlds yet unknown. The atmosphere has vanished. The seas have boiled away. The land melts. Lava streams down the naked hills.

Trumpets sound as the sun swells outward, spewing its last reserves of energy into the night of space.

The earth skims through an envelope of luminous white gas, in eventless rounds.

THE DYING SUN (CGI) - PLANETARY NEBULA - TENDER MUSIC

The dying sun collapses to a fraction of its former size, a white dwarf now.

All man's sacrifices, his work, his suffering and genius are gone without a trace. Nothing seems the better or worse for it, nothing improved or diminished. He was here one day, swept away the next.

The sun, torn from its axis, drifts through space without purpose or direction, an undistinguished cinder glowing with a faint blue light, no brighter than today's full moon.

Behind it, like a lost child, trails a remnant of the earth.

NEW WORLDS, IMAGINARY LIFE (CGI) - PANDROMEDA

New worlds spring up from the ashes of the old. New suns, with new planets in their spheres. Numberless galaxies, in a universe without center or circumference.

As the universe grows older, life assumes new forms. It runs like a fire to the uttermost reaches of space and time -- breaks free of its confinement to mortal flesh -- resolves itself into the unbounded and ethereal -- into spirit, light.

DEGENERATE ERA (CGI) - A THOUSAND TRILLION YEARS FROM NOW - LAST WORLDS PERISHING - DEATH OF THE UNIVERSE - END OF TIME

At length these new worlds perish like those which preceded them. Their mountains burn like tar. Their suns go out like candles in the wind. Stars are scattered like chaff, and the heavens roll up like a scroll.

The expansion of the universe accelerates. The galaxies recede out of sight of each other. All but those in our local group become invisible. Gradually, as they run out of hydrogen, star formation ceases. Only brown and white dwarfs remain, with neutron stars, black holes, atoms the size of the Milky Way, and other bizarre products of this era. With each passing year they drift farther and farther apart from each other.

Night sinks into a deeper night. Now and then there is a burst of light as two dwarfs collide to form a new star.

When there is nothing left to devour, the black holes themselves evaporate away.

All dies, even death itself. Time comes to a close, and all is as it was in the beginning.

Shall the creation leave off here? Has death no purpose, great as life's?

The same triumphant music accompanies the departure of these celestial scenes as greeted their arrival at the start of our story, when the stars were first born. A hymn of joy.

Though all that lives is doomed to die, something yet remains. Though even our universe is not eternal, there yet is that which is.

THE MULTIVERSE (CGI) - MULTIPLE BIG BANGS - THIRD EXPANSION

From the sadness and gloom of the last night, new universes burst forth, one rising out of the other, a fountain of light.

Creation is eternal birth. A beginning without end. It happens in every instant of time.

The same power which burns in the stars and nebulae burns equally in us. Our being is a miracle, equal with the creation of the universe, and like the universe, each day is created anew.

For a third time, the cosmos expands. Universes froth and dance like bubbles in a pot of boiling water. Most contain no life -- unstable seas of neutrinos, photons and electrons, incapable of combining to form any higher structure -- but what can we say of the countless others?

We have reviewed the whole of time, in order that we might see what is without beginning or end -- without growth, without decay -- eternity revealing itself in the phenomena of time -- as active in undoing as in doing.

TIGHT ON JACK (30) - DAWN

The first shafts of dawn reach into the city of desolation.

EXT. CITY - CROSSROADS - DAWN

Jack finds himself at the edge of the city. A choice is offered him: he may either go back into the labyrinth where he wandered so long, or come out into the unknown and unfamiliar.

EXT. WALL, RAMPS, DOOR - REIMERS RANCH SET - DAWN

He sees a ramp, a ladder, a gateway, a door.

Gathering his courage, he goes forward. The door is ajar. He stands at the threshold. There is no sound of life, only the wind. What lies on the other side? Does he dare to see?

One step, and he is through.

EXT. FIELD BEYOND THE WALL - SUSPENSEFUL MUSIC

He stands in a field beyond the wall, which already seems to lie far behind him. He hears the singing of cicadas. The land is dry. He looks for water. He will not find it here.

EXT. SLOT CANYON - GOBLIN VALLEY - SLICKROCK (UTAH) WITH TIME LAPSE OF FLOWING WATER, CLOUDS - CLIMB

He passes through the narrow defile of a slot canyon. His heart pounds with dread. He climbs through the rock.

He sees a coral snake on the ground. This and other images from his past gradually take shape -- assume a sense they did not have before. At last he begins to understand the meaning and the pattern of his life. Everything seems a clue, an oracle: the nighthawk overhead, the rising moon, the faint sound of a guitar.

EXT. STREAM - POOL AMONG PETRIFIED DUNES - DAWN

A stream runs through the rock. He approaches it. A canyon wren is singing. He kneels down beside the water. He drinks from it. He bathes his face and neck.

We have traveled up the river of time -- ascended, from nature to the soul.

Paradise is not a place here or there. The soul is paradise; it opens before us; here, today. The humblest things show it. We live in the eternal, even now.

EXT. SUNFLOWER FIELD

Sunflowers, their heads turned towards their source: the unseen sun, illuminating all with its bright shafts, pressing eagerly through chinks and cracks, driving the darkness before it --

EXT. LAND OF THE DEAD - MIST - DUST - CAVE/SEA/CITY/QUARRY - UTAH SALT FLATS - MONO LAKE - GRASSLAND - BOMARZO - DAWN

Dawn tints the high clouds as a fresh wind finds its way into the land of death, at the end of that road from which there is no return, where men sit in darkness, where dust is their food.

The mists dissolve away. Light breaks through a high window, awakening the dead. The sleepers open their eyes, look about. They rise up exultant, changed -- fresh as they were in the days of their youth.

They gather from different places -- all who have ever lived. They ascend towards the light at the mouth of a cave. They come out of the city streets where they last walked -- out of quarries and abandoned factories, and up from the depths of the sea.

Their faces are covered with ash. Each wears that costume which indicates his character or occupation while he was alive: a ball gown, a cassock, a military uniform or simply his Sunday best. One drags a chain; another pushes a large ball. Gradually, as though at the close of a masquerade, they put these disguises aside.

They stop by a pool to wash their faces. Their features grow more distinct.

They wander over a salt flat. At first the ground is dry and cracked. Then, with a mounting excitement, they discover water beneath their feet. Ahead lies a mountain. Rain clouds stand above its peak.

Shoots of young grass spring up through the hard ground.

EXT. SAND DUNES - REUNION AND REBIRTH

Men and women embrace in the dawn, reunited at last. Husband and wife, mother and child, greet each other in joy and awe. Eagerly they tell each other all that has happened. The ages since they last saw each other have passed off like a dream. Here there is no before or after.

EXT. SHORE OF ETERNITY- MUSIC OF UNBOUNDED JOY

They go down toward the shore, entranced by a growing brightness in the east. They speak with each other in whispers.

The shore teems with people now. Water laps at their feet. A crown lies cast down on the wet sand. Mrs. Stone finds her son, Mrs. McKeever her husband. Jack sees other figures from his past: Mr. Reese, O.C., his grandmother and his uncle, Betty and Ruth, Cayler and others: the prisoner, the lame man, Marsha and Robert. It is as though they were coming together in one great chorus.

This is the end of the voyage of life. The music sings: all came from love, to love all shall return.

Jack has crossed over death's threshold, gone beyond space and time, to some greater life which includes death within it.

HIS BROTHER

Now, from a distance, he hears that sweet voice which he trusts most in all the world.

JACK
Brother!

As RL approaches, Jack reaches out and takes his hand. We see him from the back; never face on.

JACK (CONT'D)
I've found you.

They melt into each other's arms. Here, in the eternal, they have not been apart.

The walls of the world fly away. It can hold them no longer. They know each other in that which is without end.

MOTHER AND FATHER

Turning, Jack sees his mother, father and Steve looking on. He leads RL towards them.

MOTHER
Is it you?

RL wipes the tears from her eyes.

MOTHER (CONT'D)
You!

She embraces her lost son. She touches his hands, his face, ecstatic. Wonder! Unspeakable joy!

FATHER
My son!

Now, with open arms, his father comes towards him. Love unites what death and suffering have put asunder. He turns to his wife. She caresses her child's hair. She looks at the strangers who are standing by, as though to ask if she is dreaming. She looks at Jack. She nods. Her grief is cured. Her doubts are ended.

JACK (O.S.)
What you are can't die.

The plain and ordinary has become a door to the infinite. He lives in that which neither comes into being nor passes away.

He takes his mother's hands. The music drops away. He knows love and not its semblance. The world itself is music now.

ETERNITY

Dawn approaches.

We pass beyond death. We arrive at the eternal, the real -- at that which neither flowers nor fades, which neither comes into being nor passes away -- that in which we might live forever. Hitherto all has been mere image; all that we think solid and permanent. Space, time, evanescent all; images only, the purpose and last end elsewhere; the life of life.

Eternity -- that realm of pure and endless light -- how shall we represent it? A ladder leading up into a tree. Sparks flying up from a fire. A bridge. A kiss. A solitary island.

A single image might serve better than several combined. The whole creation in the figure of a tree. The smallest leaf communicates with the lowest root, all parts feeding on the same sap, breathing in the same air and sunlight, drawing the same life up from the darkness of the earth below.

Simple images, captured with a pinhole camera. After the nervous movements of time, we see that of which time is a moving picture.

A child; the similarity in form between the shape of his ear and that of an oyster shell, between the cowlick at the crown of his head and a galaxy. A lotus, its stalk rising clear of the water; its leaf to which nothing clings. Sequoias. A rose, unfolding. Life surpassing itself.

A locomotive approaches the end of a tunnel. The light draws closer. Soon it shall burst out into the day. No longer a blind mechanism, it has become (quick dissolves, quick cuts) a river -- living, flowing -- the pure waters of the river of life, rushing down from a mountain peak.

Winter has passed. The leafless woods our hero wandered in are green and cool, murmurous with the song of birds.

You separate the true from the false. You, to whom all things return, from whom all proceed; in whom they are; the beginning of things and their last end; the goal of each and all.

The whole of the picture has been a sifting. The chaff flies away, the kernel remains. Something lives in you that shall outlast the stars.

EXT. SHORE

As Jack watches, his mother spreads her arms towards her children, restored to faith and happiness, reconciled to life.

Now he sees that it was she -- his mysterious guide, the guardian of his heart, the source of his moral being. She is the mother of all creation. All flows out of her; she is the gateway, the door. She smiles through all things.

Through her the eternal sought him. From out of her mouth it spoke. Through her life and actions she brought them near it.

MOTHER (O.S)
Fear no longer. You shall find me.

The camera rises with the music's circling strings -- over the trees, over the hills and plains. Now there is rest. The peace of eternity spreads about him, and all is as it was in the beginning.

EXT. CITY

Rain. Weeds in the cracks of a sidewalk. Children playing. We are back with Jack in the city. Even in these streets, the eternal shines. This is God's world, and not an infinite plain of chaos and sorrow after all.

Though he must linger here a while yet, he will not despair. A new life lies before him. A faith which sees through death.

MOTHER (O.S.)
Know that I am.

EXT. O'BRIEN HOUSE

We return to the present, to the noise and confusion of the everyday, to the place we set out from. We see it now as though for the first time. What seemed plain and familiar glows with a radiance it did not display before. We have found the infinite in the everyday, the commonplace.

Jack looks about. Will the revelation be forgotten? Will it seem a passing fancy -- a dream?

Inside the house, his father is playing the piano. His mother has gone into the backyard. A bell sounds.

The great oak tree stands like a sentient being -- thoughtful, benevolent -- looking down on him.

He puts his ear against the trunk and listens for those words that, it was foretold, would destroy the evil in men's hearts and bring them good.

The camera rises up through the branches, cranes up and up until it breaks out of the canopy of leaves into the sky above.

All ends in peace, as music does. The last chord melts into ordinary production sound. Time has reappeared; resumed its sway.

And still the vision is not the journey. The real journey has yet to begin.

Will he give himself to this new life? Does he dare?

A stranger, smiling.

A threshold.

A star.

THE END